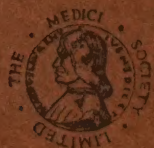


# VINCENT VAN GOGH



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# VINCENT VAN GOGH











MAIRIE IN AUVERS

14TH JULY 1890



# VINCENT VAN GOGH

A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY BY  
JULIUS MEIER-GRAEFE

*Translated by*

JOHN HOLROYD REECE

With One Hundred and Two  
Illustrations after the works of  
the Artist



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*Chapter VI*  
*The Brotherhood of the South*







COTTAGES IN ST. MARIES  
QUILL DRAWING 1888





## *Chapter VI*

# *The Brotherhood of the South*

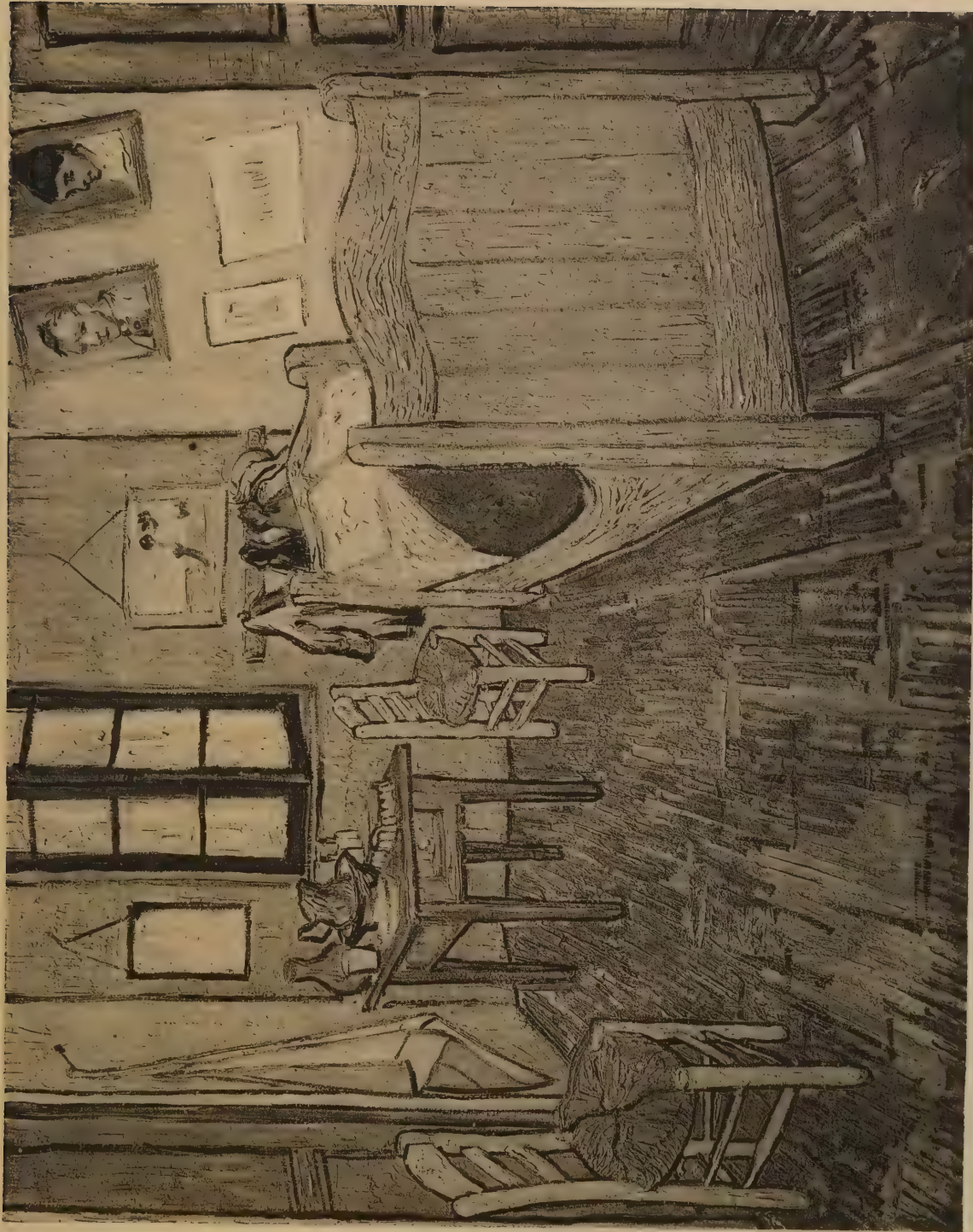
**G**AUGUIN arrived in Arles on the 20th of October 1888, exactly eight months after Vincent's arrival there. Gauguin was a most remarkable creature. Vincent had expected to find a suffering invalid, and instead he met the athletic giant he had seen in Paris, one mass of muscle and sinew. He was a mixture of a Parisian and an aborigine. His exterior was cold, and yet he possessed a touchingly soft heart, and he was a unique artist. You could guess that even from his rapid grasp of the necessities of life. He would settle in an instant what presented a labyrinth of problems to Vincent. Gauguin was as practical as a man could be and his decisions were arrived at instantaneously. You saved no end of time with such a man, a perfect treasure in the house, and it gave you a sense of security. He was a most remarkable artist and a most extraordinary friend. He was a trifle short with acquaintances, and laughed when Vincent stressed a point of Roulin's or spoke of the kindliness of all these folk. None the less every one submitted to his will, and he seemed invariably to find the right word on the right occasion. His habits were the habits of a ruler. In fact his was a ruler's nature as every artist's should be; he was a Rubens. Undoubtedly he would have made a good statesman, he knew all about politics, and had his own opinion on Carnot, Clemenceau, Rochefort, Freycinet, Jules Ferry and on parliamentary republics. He was also a distinguished financier, a faculty he had presumably acquired in his earlier profession. His clear perception of every detail enabled him to triumph over circumstances with ease.

## *Vincent van Gogh*

Money, to him, was not a sinister power to be afraid of, for it obeyed his intelligence. You could make as much money as you wanted, only it was rather boring sometimes to bother about it. He had some justification for talking like that because Theo had just sold one of his Brittany pictures for no less than five hundred francs; a sum which compared to the high merits of Gauguin seemed almost modest. Gauguin forbade Vincent to take such a view. He considered that one hundred francs or ten thousand were equally little compensation for creative effort. His belief in the fictitiousness of money-values had driven him to give up the banking-humbug, in which millions could be acquired. He now amused himself by getting along with as little money as possible. Theo's monthly allowance was sufficient for a princely existence, provided the materials you had to purchase were not bought from an apothecary.

Vincent had already made this last discovery for himself and he hastened to compare his own powers of economy with Gauguin's and told his companion all the cheapest sources of supply. He had found a little carpenter the other day who made very decent frames for three francs each. Gauguin laughed. He never bought frames at all, but simply nailed narrow laths on to his stretchers and then painted them white. Gilt frames were only meant for the bourgeois, and a very fine white frame like that did not cost three francs but three sous. Gauguin also bought his colours in a crude condition wholesale and then ground them himself, thereby saving sixty per cent. He even prepared his own canvas, and apart from saving nearly a hundred per cent., he obtained a better surface to paint on. Would the old masters ever have dreamt of giving work of such importance for their *métier* to hirelings?





VINCENT'S BEDROOM

1888





## *The Brotherhood of the South*

Remarkable creature! Vincent saw it more clearly every day—everything he lacked Gauguin possessed, especially agility. Art was not a sentimental affair, but was produced by bodily activity. An artist was a fencer endowed with imagination. A man who was incapable of nailing a lid on to a box, must be subject to inhibitions. A proper painter ought really to be able to sole his own shoes, or if you put him down in a wilderness, he ought to be able to build a yellow house with his own hands. An artist who was dependent on so-called civilization—Gauguin spat when he used the word—was independent only in his deluded imagination.

Gauguin did not merely talk in this way, although he talked a good deal, but he was as good as his word. They ate at home, and Gauguin looked after the cooking. Vincent could never remember having been so well fed. Gauguin might have been chef to the Duchesse d'Uzès. The food he cooked was not so heavy and indigestible as Marseillaise cooking. The vegetables retained their natural flavour, and the meat its maximum nutriment. Gauguin was not proud of his accomplishment, nor did cooking take up his time. He did it offhand, in a minute, and it was simply one of the advantages of his great inborn ability. Vincent had never felt his limitations so acutely.

It was difficult to extract a precise judgment from this remarkable man about Vincent's pictures. Gauguin praised certain details, such as the expression of the Sower. He also approved of the Sunflowers, and he seemed to have some affection for the pictures in his bedroom. When Vincent considered the matter carefully he decided that he could never expect his pictures to please Gauguin seriously, and it was superfluous to ask questions. His pictures seemed to him by the side of Gauguin's like butcheries; they lacked Gauguin's controlled repose of

## *Vincent van Gogh*

colour. They suffered from the weight of their rhythm, which was nothing but ponderous materialism. As soon as Gauguin and Vincent were together they each painted a picture of the same women reapers in the vineyard. Vincent had really hoped that their first work together would be portraits of each other, to symbolize their engagement as it were, and Vincent would have regarded it as no mean honour to be painted by Gauguin. Gauguin, however, required a considerable intimacy with his model before he would launch upon the creation of a portrait, for he painted portraits, like everything else, from memory, and the necessary intimacy could not possibly exist as yet. Some day their acquaintance would ripen into intimacy, and meantime working together in the vineyard had its good sides too. Vincent recognized his limitations. Gauguin's work was a closely woven web, which brought out his large figures and united them at the same time. Fair, well-balanced harmonies warmed the vision of your eyes as you beheld his pictures. The most important feature of his work was his method of binding one figure to another by a form of decoration taken from the expressions of his models. His well-ordered style was yet bold, and it possessed repose, distinction and clarity. In Vincent's pictures everything was topsy-turvy; his colours flooded the canvas. It was a mixture of human beings, leaves, soil and clouds, and it flamed like red wine. Vincent did not co-ordinate his materials, he was not the painter of his picture, but the labourer in the vineyard who sat in amongst his vines. His pictures were part of the events they portrayed, and were still in the process of evolution. Perhaps a certain co-ordination was to be found in them, but it was buried by their own activity. Vincent felt ashamed of himself as soon as he saw both pictures side by side and wanted to throw his own into the nearest fire. He determined to find a new





THE SOWER

1888



## *The Brotherhood of the South*

method. Gauguin's pictures were more restful, just as Gauguin's personality was more in repose. Nothing seemed more desirable to Vincent than this quality. He could not, of course, alter his temperament and it would be folly even to wish to, but there was a tranquility which could be wrested from any nature, perhaps experience would bring it. The few years by which Gauguin was ahead of him were insufficient to explain the difference. Gauguin possessed a far more penetrating mind, he was, in fact, a most remarkable man. When he spoke of art he created a panorama before your eyes, which he drew across your field of vision sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly and sometimes in leaps and bounds. He started with the old Egyptians and ended up with Manet and Cézanne. If you paid attention properly you could perceive the logical sequence as he proceeded, but you had to be very attentive, because Gauguin would unfold several smaller panoramas by the side of the big one. It was difficult, and you became quite nervous if you failed to keep the various sections of the panorama distinct, if you proved to be, in short, a stupid listener. What was most odd was the fact that many figures in Vincent's conception of the panorama were missing. Where, for instance, were Millet, Breton, Ziem?—Vincent asked in all innocence. Gauguin gaped. Breton? Ziem?—He remembered, this creature had had similar notions in Paris. Gauguin inquired whether Meissonier should also be included.—Vincent replied at once that there could hardly be any doubt of it.—Gauguin often felt inclined to scrutinize Vincent to discover whether he was really serious or not. Vincent enlarged upon the merits of Meissonier. Gauguin's laughter was still as sharp as steel, just as it had been in the *entresol* on the boulevard, and sometimes his muscular thorax thundered as of old. Meissonier! But why, what was the matter? Vincent stammered in his bewilderment.—Oh well, Meissonier. . . .



## *Vincent van Gogh*

Gauguin discovered evil moods in the owner of the yellow house. He was prepared to admit certain qualities in Vincent's pictures even if his own belonged to a different sphere. But whence his absurd banality? And at the same time he talked of Delacroix and was intimately acquainted with the work of Rembrandt. Meissonier and Rembrandt! There was the same disorder in his dress, his studio, in everything, and it all came from his endless naturalism. Anybody who was so incapable of serious thought could never build a career for himself, much less create an art of his own.

Vincent admitted his slovenliness, he did think a good deal, but no doubt in the wrong way. If Gauguin would teach him to think in the right way, he would gladly be his pupil. Only perhaps it was not altogether necessary to thunder so much and to laugh so shrilly.

As there was plenty of time in the evenings Gauguin undertook, in addition to his management of their domestic affairs, the task of instilling sane views into Vincent. The mischief of modern civilization was just this very inability to differentiate between Delacroix and Jules Breton, this capacity to swallow them both. It was part and parcel of naturalism to swallow everything or not to swallow at all. Vincent had intoxicated himself with nature as he used to intoxicate himself in Paris with bad wine. It was just a matter of taste.

Vincent confessed that he was not at all satisfied with himself. He had often felt similar misgivings, and his painting had probably nothing whatever to do with art. Nevertheless he had made some kind of a start.

Gauguin explained that Vincent's work was much more than a start, no one could deny that it revealed an astounding temperament. He possessed the ability to juggle with this temperament and to make his brush serve it. He had a passion for chrome-yellows. His work

## *The Brotherhood of the South*

showed even something more, it showed a flawless honesty, even Impressionism of a more systematic kind than that of the excellent Claude Monet, and almost as sound as the Impressionism of the worthy Père Pissarro.

No doubt Gauguin was right. As soon as Gauguin went out Vincent thought about his words and then he found the right conclusions, but at the moment that Gauguin said these startling things it was well-nigh impossible not to contradict. His icy tone was annoying, and so was the way in which he dismissed any subject in two sentences. Had he already finished with Pissarro? Surely that was going a little too fast and too far. A year ago he had spoken very differently of him. Was it not a little unkind? Had Gauguin not learnt from Pissarro?

Gauguin replied that he had undoubtedly learnt from Pissarro. He had learnt a pile of nonsense and pointillism. He owed the loss of three years to Pissarro and the pleasant task of unlearning all the tomfoolery he had acquired.

Vincent presumed that everything was not nonsense that Gauguin did not produce. 'Yes, almost everything else is nonsense,' was the cool reply. And not only in art. The panorama of art revealed ever weaker pictures as it drew near modern times, and this degeneracy was due chiefly to the disintegration of society, which could also be represented as a panorama. Gauguin was full of panoramas. Any one who had once grasped the direction of modern evolution and realized the impossibility of arresting its progress, could not do better than turn his back on Europe and sail to the colonies to live among so-called savages. That was his object. Everything he did here was only a means to get out of Europe. As soon as he had enough money he would sail back to Martinique or some other happy island, never to return!

## *Vincent van Gogh*

Vincent felt a cold shudder pass over him. His helplessness made him mute. He had not, of course, dared to tell Gauguin anything of his plans for the community in the yellow house, and now it seemed impossible to tell him about it to his face in so many words. Nevertheless the whole object of their living together could not possibly be mistaken for anything else, and it was surely gratuitously offensive to interpret their joint lives in any other way. Vincent had however discovered Gauguin's attitude in the first minute after his arrival.

Vincent was incapable of regarding his existence in Arles or elsewhere as a temporary makeshift. Every one of his instincts opposed such a view, otherwise he would never have been able to put his brush to canvas. No doubt he was as sceptical as Gauguin about most things, especially on certain days. But his scepticism was confined to his intellect and not his emotions. Once he felt like that he would have to commit suicide and he had not got as far as that yet. It was just because art was threatened by all the world, that artists must hold together and form a community. Perhaps it was all nonsense, none the less; Gauguin had considered life from every angle and naturally knew more about it.

He was a most remarkable man but there were contradictions in his nature. If he was good and every one else evil, it was hard to fathom why he had sent his wife and his children—glorious creatures to judge by their photographs—to Denmark, and why he behaved in Arles as if he were not married at all. But it was mean to think like that, and there were no doubt sufficient reasons for his line of action, which, doubtless, had something to do with another of his panoramas, the marriage panorama. Vincent felt that he least of all, had any right to judge him, and he regarded his own unspoken criticism as petty rancour.







THE PARK IN ARLES,

1888

## *The Brotherhood of the South*

Gauguin did not lay claim to any moral superiority. He believed Vincent to be much more moral, especially in the European sense of the word. Gauguin only claimed that he allowed a little reason to enter into his calculations. Reason was the foremost guide to every conception an artist cherished. But even if in Europe all action was dominated by the instincts of the herd, art at any rate should serve the needs of the imagination. If imagination was not to develop into sheer folly artists would have to learn to control their minds a little. Naturalism was the substitute for control for runaway slaves, and it meant mental bankruptcy and final collapse.

Vincent gibbed. He loved nature though he had not much to say about naturalism. If you blocked his road to nature, you barred every path for him.—Gauguin would not give way. Of course every one loved the object of his weakness, although the object really mattered little compared to the quality of your inclination towards it. Love, every one knew, made you blind. That was the worst of it.—Vincent laughed. He had imagined that he had learned how to use his eyes here.—Of course if you plant yourself in front of an apple tree, it requires no clairvoyance not to see the whole of it. He, Gauguin, had felt himself to be a painter from the moment that he succeeded in painting his first picture without seeing, extempore!—An old bitterness rose up in Vincent. How Gauguin saw through him, even without looking! How he turned your world upside down in a twinkling!—But Gauguin insisted that Meissonier and his confrères probably believed themselves to possess visionary powers.

As soon as Gauguin bandied about personalities, Vincent lost his temper. He could not endure mud-slinging against his idols. Gauguin could say what he liked about his work, he knew that it was worthless



## Vincent van Gogh

and could never be anything else, but Gauguin must leave others alone if he wanted to live in peace with him.

Gauguin shrugged his shoulders as usual and set about his work.

In spite of everything Gauguin was a wonderful man, and a most valued friend. A man's actions were, after all, more important than his words, and Vincent never looked at a picture of Gauguin's without feeling the deepest gratitude towards him.

As Gauguin made a point of it, Vincent decided to paint extempore! Gauguin doubtless did not give him this advice in order to quarrel with him, but in order to let his ungrateful friend benefit by the knowledge to which his own pictures testified so convincingly. Gauguin, he knew, only advised for the best, and in exchange received stupid nonsense from him. Vincent also realized how much he risked by being so dependent upon nature. Gauguin told him to paint objects which his memory had condensed into pictures. Vincent made an attempt with his parents' garden in Nuenen. The attempt failed and the picture was put on the fire, but Vincent was not to be dismayed. He decided to try a *motif* which he could compare with nature after he had painted it. He painted the avenue of graves in Arles, which he and Gauguin had often passed, and painted it in the studio. This method possessed the additional advantage of making Vincent independent of the weather. And possibly he might by this means come to realize his secret dream of painting a starry sky, which of course could not be done from nature.

Gauguin liked his avenue with the graves. Its simple *motif*, a broad irregular road with poplars on either side and plain Roman sarcophagi in front of the trees, was suited to large treatment. Van Gogh exaggerated the original structure, made the rows of trees into high symmetrical walls of red flames and joined them together at the bottom by







A CAFÉ IN ARLES  
WATER-COLOUR 1888

## *The Brotherhood of the South*

a row of immense stones. Thus he produced a gigantic avenue, capable of bearing the triumphal march of a Cæsar. Gauguin praised the clarity of the *motif* and the reticence of Vincent's manner. If he continued on these lines they might arrive at a sensible and a mutual basis. They might paint frescoes together.—Vincent stared. Frescoes! You might just as well have suggested Egyptian pyramids to him. Gauguin laughed. That was just like these benefactors of humanity, they talked incessantly about the community and as soon as you showed them a sensible step in this direction, they stood there and gaped like idiots.

Vincent had supposed that you needed all kinds of things for frescoes, walls for instance.

Gauguin pointed to their white-washed walls; you could not paint proper frescoes there, you really needed the assistance of a mason, but you could use these to practice on a small scale. He had done it in Pont Aven.

Then he proceeded to deliver to Vincent a long lecture about mural painting, and unfolded another panorama, extending from Pompeii to Puvis de Chavannes. Gauguin liked frescoes because they released your mind from the fetters generally imposed by your hand. You could no longer paint from nature, because you could not take your model with you on the ladder. You had to retain the entire composition in your mind's eye and then paint it on the wall with simple strokes.

Seurat had previously talked to him about frescoes, and Vincent therefore connected them with some form of Neo-Impressionism. Perhaps it meant you had to *pointiller* again.—Gauguin condemned Seurat and all his ideas to perdition. You simply sat down, thought out your scheme and then mounted the ladder. There you were high up in the cupola of the dome and you painted for an effect calculated to be seen twenty yards off. You could not afford to suffer from dizziness.



## *Vincent van Gogh*

Some attempts were made, whose remnants, covered over with white-wash, were found again later on the walls of the yellow house. Vincent in all probability did not share in these attempts, as frescoes were outside his pale. At the same time, he was anxious to prepare himself for them, and so he painted again the avenue with the graves, which had pleased Gauguin. He treated his subject rather differently this time, and painted it of course entirely from memory. His second version did not please him any better, and he found that the new method was subject to certain dangers. The reticence which Gauguin had praised made you lose your nervous strength, your structure as well as your colours became thin and flimsy, and instead of painting receding planes you produced flat surfaces. The result was like scene-painting.

Gauguin, who was rather bored in Arles at times, told Vincent that there were painters whose work became as flat as a pancake as soon as you forced them to use their intelligence alone. It was a sad fact which nothing could alter.

But Vincent went to his friend Roulin, and painted him and his wife and their children, and thus produced half-a-dozen portraits which looked, by the side of the old ones, as if they had been washed. Gauguin looked at them and shrugged his shoulders while Vincent talked about the chic of the symbolists. Gauguin said their work was painted literature because they tried to avoid the difficulties of the painter's craft. They looked down on nature because they could not look anything straight in the face. They thought they were above simple models like Roulins, but the Roulins of this earth were a hundred times too much for them.

Gauguin was in the vein to amuse himself. If you teased a fellow like Vincent a little you could make him go to the North Pole. Vincent





PORTRAIT OF THE PAINTER WITH A PIPE



## *The Brotherhood of the South*

walked up to him and took both his hands: 'Gauguin, be a good chap, will you?'—his words came hoarsely. Gauguin laughed. He would love to be good only he simply could not express the goodness of his soul with heavy impasto.

Vincent nodded inanely, and went out and rushed about on the plain until he was exhausted. He stayed away for six hours. Curious, but he could never find the words he wanted at the critical moment. Perhaps words were of no use with these people from Paris. They talked and painted and listened only to external noises. A man like Gauguin fled to the savages, but he carried his boulevard with him on his back. Poor Gauguin! First of all he would have to get Paris out of his system. It was a kind of disease and the yellow house might be a better tonic than Martinique or Tahiti. He would try to help him, not with harsh words, in fact without any words at all. Gauguin was probably at bottom, at the very bottom, though a great artist, not a good man. Therefore he must be made good. The luminosity which he lacked was goodness, for which there was no room in his philosophy of reason. Even his objection to the colour of clogs was only another form of the unkind superiority of the boulevard. But as Gauguin was miles above the boulevard in a hundred ways he might overcome the rest if he was helped. Vincent wanted to help by the only means he had of helping any one, namely with real pictures.

That very day he painted his chair with the butter-colour straw seat, standing on the gorgeous red tiles. He painted the picture as thick as his hands. He put nothing into his canvas but the chair unembellished and inartistic, but so that the whole yellow house enters into the spectator, and Arles as well and the entire Provence and Holland from Nuenen to Drenthe.

## *Vincent van Gogh*

When he showed the little picture to Gauguin anticipating his usual shrug, Gauguin let a curse escape his lips. The thick chair delighted him. The chair was as strong as the sunflowers, perhaps even stronger, it was the very soul of a chair. Nobody had ever painted like that. Queer creature! The Impressionists might as well pack up and crawl under the table.

Vincent of course saw in Gauguin's remark only exaggeration, just as he had done when Gauguin told him that his sunflowers were better than Monet. Nevertheless he found the experience very pleasant and resolved never to quarrel again. You had to talk of course, that's what you were together for, and there was something in the air after you had finished your work which compelled you to talk. If you answered one of Gauguin's absurd declarations, he would simply shrug his shoulders and let you go on with the conversation, and even then he was not satisfied. People who wanted to get to the bottom of anything always found it difficult to arrive at agreement. Who could speak the same language nowadays, even with his own brother? All panoramas were much too clumsy, even a stupid chair could upset them. Accordingly you had to find other means of making yourself understood.—Gauguin suggested that they should drive to Montpellier. There in the museum such means were to be found on the walls. In the Bruyas room there were Courbet and Delacroix. They could drive over in the diligence for one franc each.

Contrary to his expectations, the day turned out well. It was already December, but the sun shone and the sky was blue. Gauguin knew the Gallery already, and acted as guide just as if he had been a relation of the generous Monsieur Bruyas, and Vincent felt as though he owed his thanks to Gauguin for his enjoyment. And he did enjoy his visit. He

## *The Brotherhood of the South*

had not been in a picture gallery for nearly a year. His eyes seemed to have rested in the interval for they were now capable of taking in much more and much more rapidly. It was a happy coincidence that the collection was rich in portraits, because just at this time portraiture appeared to Vincent to be a domain specially suited to himself. And the Courbets, no matter what Gauguin said, were like portraits in bronze. And even Gauguin let the Bruyas portrait pass, though he preferred the one by Delacroix. The visitors were in agreement. Naturally Delacroix out-topped the others, if in nothing but dignity.—What a dignity! How small you felt! A Prince! He painted them differently from his other pictures, just as you would behave differently in grand society from the way you behaved at home. The visitors agreed again. No one else was as restrained as Delacroix. He could slow down his pace and yet retain the full force of expression, while you exhausted all your strength, down to the last drop of blood in you, in every little still-life. If you didn't, your canvas lost all its life and action. Gauguin had tried to do the same thing with other means. Now Vincent understood Gauguin's opposition to his own impetuous manner. Gauguin was quite right. You ought to be more conventional, you could never be conventional enough. But where could you find your convention? Delacroix was born with it. In his day there was such a thing as an effective, tangible, operative European Paris, and not only a Paris of painters. There were still men of noble bearing, not only in pictures.

'Noble bearing' was one of Gauguin's pet expressions. The succeeding generation of artists had seen through the pose of the bourgeois, which was not a difficult achievement; they thought that by spitting everywhere they would appear more honest, and they expressed nobility of mien by the rhythm of their brush-work. One day they would



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penitently return to Ingres. If an effective convention no longer existed, you had to go out and look for one. If you could not find one in Europe, then somewhere outside of it among the savages. Savage life was rich in legends. Would Vincent care to go with him to Martinique?

Vincent's joy at this spontaneous invitation overcame his horror of an exotic climate. He was ready to go anywhere, to the end of the world. But the legend they needed could only be produced by a community. Wherever you found it, here or elsewhere, a temple would spring up. Wherever two or three were gathered together, there was God. Very well, they would transplant the yellow house to Martinique.

Delacroix led them gently back to Europe. They stood in front of his '*Algerian Women*.' Next to them hung the lovely three-quarter length of the '*Mulatto Woman*.' Gauguin had once copied her enthusiastically. The Europe of Delacroix! It extended beyond the outskirts of Paris where most of the others were stuck. Delacroix had been further afield. Ordinary mortals were in danger of becoming exotic if they went too far. But they could afford to face this danger lightly, for worse dangers threatened at home. Gauguin did not pride himself on his failure to cope with Europe. His longing was perhaps a cloak for his weakness. Delacroix became a European after he had left Europe. Gauguin had never spoken like that before. What a remarkable man he was! Vincent could have hugged him. And the fact that Gauguin showed this warmth under the shadow of Delacroix spoke volumes in itself. But Gauguin need not be at all ashamed of his inclination. Europe was full of negroes. Vincent regarded himself and his coloured patches as more than exotic. He beat a tom-tom with his yellow. Delacroix would have covered his ears. Gauguin was quite right; people who could show their strength only with fat lumps of paste did



CUT SUNFLOWERS  
1888/89





## *The Brotherhood of the South*

not paint, but spat. But there was nothing else for it, he had to struggle on, and in a few years he might arrive at a higher level, perhaps.

Then they looked at the '*Daniel in the Lions' Den*.' Now that was a picture Vincent would like to have copied. He did not hesitate to say that it would be sinful to put a brush to any other use. The impression it made on him reminded him of the hour he had spent before the '*Night Watch*' in Amsterdam. Gauguin said that the one was the natural result of the other, only Delacroix was infinitely greater. You must be quite clear on that point, and in spite of, or rather just because this picture of Daniel could never have been created without Rembrandt.

Vincent regarded such assertions as superfluous. He himself felt a stronger leaning towards Delacroix, but you did not compare the Rhone with the Rhine just because you happened to live near the one or the other. Nobody compared peaches to grapes. Such comparisons served no purpose; they were stupid intellectual tricks that savoured of stock-exchange speculations.

Gauguin smiled. There was a good side to the stock-exchange. He was grateful for his experience there, which had given him a proper appreciation of the value of art.

Vincent felt ashamed. Of course, Gauguin had been on the stock-exchange. How could he have forgotten it!

Gauguin did not take the slightest offence at such references. On the contrary he was proud of his past, but he changed the subject to fencing with foils. That was just like him. You could never finish a discussion to the end with Gauguin. Theory of fencing and Delacroix!

Gauguin, of course, had a theory of his own whose merits were amply proved by his success in the fencing-school. It was not for nothing that he was everywhere considered a first class fencer.

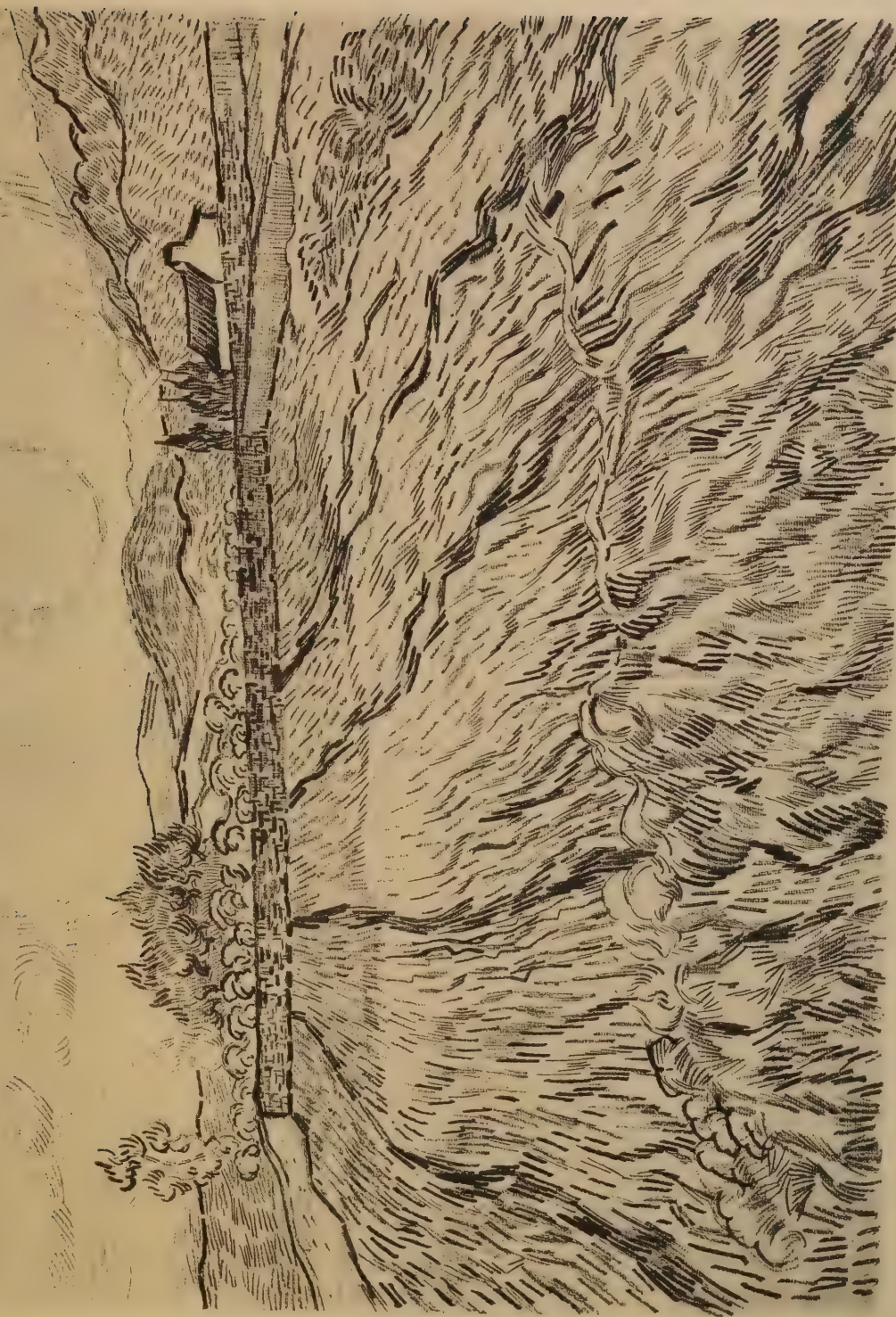
## *Vincent van Gogh*

Vincent could well imagine it, in fact it really went without saying in such an athlete, a man of his agility. He could not help being an excellent performer with foils, but Vincent knew nothing whatever about it.

Gauguin explained his theory. The French method stood in the sign of her declining militaristic star. The school of Joinville-le-Pont was considered to be the first, and it held a position similar to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. You were supposed to be rather careful with any one who had learnt fencing at Joinville-le-Pont. They had tricks of their own, and were rather like clever acrobats, but the whole school was not worth wasting a shot on. Gauguin's theory was not a matter of mere routine. A good hand scored every now and again, skilled legs scored more frequently, and a man with a sound head on his shoulders scored always. Mental superiority alone made a good fencer of you. And anybody with brains took a man's physical peculiarities into consideration. Any course of training that did not base its method on this fundamental consideration was rubbish. The stupidity of the academicians at Joinville-le-Pont prescribed similar arms and legs for all their pupils. The situation was much the same with boxing. So-called French boxing presupposed an ideal type of boxer. There was, apart from America, only one school of boxing and that was the English school. Thank goodness he had always had English trainers.

Vincent slunk alongside the athletic Gauguin. They went to lunch somewhere. Gauguin was always in a cheerful mood when he could talk of such subjects. After lunch they returned to the museum, as there was not much else to do in Montpellier, especially as Vincent did not play billiards. Gauguin had once made a break of a hundred and fifty in a match.—Via billiards and riding they returned to Delacroix and





FIELDS  
QUILL DRAWING 1888/89





## *The Brotherhood of the South*

Rembrandt. After all, comparing one master with another was not just deciding which was the superior, as with two fencers. It was the only method of educating yourself, so far as it was possible to do anything for one's own education. Making comparisons necessitated above all profound thinking, and that was the way Delacroix had schooled himself. In just this way Delacroix had succeeded in going beyond Rembrandt and by this means he had avoided the anguish that weighed down the Dutchman's fervour. Comparative thinking had helped him to his lightness and his agility. Rembrandt had brooded over his indigestible mysticism. He would not have been any use at foils. Poussin and Claude he would probably have abhorred. He lacked the traditions of the ancients.

Gauguin was rather trying at times. His dialectics were rather like his fencing, only much more Parisian. His jokes were as ready to his hand as his rapier. But it was impossible to fence with every subject, in fact no serious subject was capable of such treatment at all. Very often he evaded the root of the matter intentionally. He did not avoid serious topics because they were alien to his mind, but from choice, which he called good taste. When he spoke of Delacroix he was never wide of the mark, but he never bit into what seemed to Vincent the heart of the subject. Vincent approached life from a different angle. Gauguin always from the stand-point of cold reason, although his method often plumbed profound depths. Gauguin considered it vulgar to speak of the bold *motifs*, or the originality of Delacroix. Anything new was always coarse in Gauguin's opinion. Emile Zola was stigmatized by him as a novelty. He supposed that some people who devoured a great many books might find a poet in Zola because he was new. Delacroix' greatness was based on his cohesion with others. The profundity

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of a man's genius could be measured by the size of the community its manifestation created.

Vincent was grateful for these words: cohesion, community. That was the whole meaning of art, if it meant anything at all. Bruyas, who had collected all these glorious pictures and given them to the public, must have been guided by similar considerations. Bruyas had erected a different kind of yellow house; he was to a large extent the founder of the Southern School of Art, which they must continue. His portrait, by the way, the one with the red beard and red hair, bore a most marked resemblance to the two Van Gogh brothers, and as Delacroix had painted the portrait, it was almost like being in contact with Delacroix himself. It struck Vincent as very odd, and gave him food for thought. Delacroix was the man who had built the yellow house of the spirit.

Gauguin and Van Gogh returned late at night. Vincent, however, insisted on lighting the fire, for there was a great deal left to be said. Gauguin was already in bed when Vincent came in once more, just for a minute. He sat down on the edge of the bed. This was the moment to unfold the scheme for the community. He sketched the principles of the undertaking, the branches in London, The Hague, in America, the small and the great boulevard, and the method of sharing in the proceeds. The time had come to set about its foundation. Once the right people were together, it was bound to succeed.

Gauguin had hardly heard a word. Vincent's lips continued to move while his friend's powerful chest rose and fell at regular intervals.

Soon after this incident Gauguin began to paint Vincent's portrait. What an artist and what a friend! Vincent was as happy as a child. Christmas was upon them, and Vincent looked forward to the first happy Christmas since his childhood. Theo really ought to have joined





L'ARLESIENNE

1888/89



## *The Brotherhood of the South*

them, but he wanted to go to Holland, where he had some mysterious errand. He had just received from Theo a letter which was much more cheerful than usual. Apparently his errand was a love-affair. If only something would come of it! If even one of them could put real children into the world, perhaps another little Bruyas.

Vincent's news was most important. He kept on running into Gauguin's room with it, and he also imagined that his friend needed to see him for the portrait, which, however, was not at all the case. Gauguin much preferred to be left alone at his work, and herein lay the great difference between the two inhabitants of the yellow house; one wanted to paint because his scepticism penetrated the nature of mankind, the other painted pictures because they were the best substitute for human beings he could find. A relationship between the two men was possible only if Gauguin sank his scepticism. Vincent hoped in his heart of hearts to convert his distinguished painter-friend to a belief in men. If his pictures lacked anything at all it was human sympathy. The duties of friendship compelled Vincent to act in the light of his newly-gained knowledge. The more he saw of Gauguin's work the more determined did he become to show his friend where he failed as a human being, and that his failure was only due to what he called 'taste,' and to a certain hesitation and Parisian delicacy of feeling. And these flaws were not found in isolated examples only, but in whole pictures; the portrait of Vincent, for example. As Vincent was always glad to receive criticisms of his work—even Roulin's opinion was helpful—and as he regarded every one of Gauguin's criticisms as a munificent present, he assumed a similar disposition in Gauguin. But Gauguin failed to understand Vincent's simple criticism, and when he became rather more explicit Gauguin was apt to lose his temper. And it really was difficult to avoid



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it, for Vincent reiterated every discovery interminably. Then he could not understand why Gauguin should want to paint a portrait so flat, although this flatness was Gauguin's characteristic means of expression. Very well, that was Gauguin's own affair, but whether your coloured surface was smooth or rough, surely you had to convey the painter's relation to his model.

Gauguin was doubtful whether any one who worshipped Meissonier was capable of understanding the nature of synthetic creative action.— Vincent found such talk as intelligible as a foreign language, but any picture was surely synthetic if it was a picture at all. Was his own portrait of *L'Arlésienne* not synthetic?—Gauguin smiled. He would agree that the *Arlésienne* was synthetic, but then this picture stood rather outside Vincent's usual range of work, which was due, perhaps, to a fact Vincent seemed to have forgotten, namely the slight but effective assistance of Gauguin. Did he not remember that Gauguin had once, with a few pencil lines, outlined the simplification of this interesting portrait?

Vincent remembered nothing of the kind. Gauguin smiled again. In that case, no doubt he had made a mistake, and he apologized profusely.—Gauguin's smile! Vincent preferred his thunder or his shrill laughter. Vincent's temper would suddenly, and at the least provocation, reach boiling point. How vulgar his smile was!—And the door crashed into its frame.

As soon as Vincent reached his room he pulled himself together. Perhaps he had thought of Gauguin when he painted the *Arlésienne*. He often thought of Gauguin, and it would be better if he thought a great deal more about him and his advice. He, Vincent, was petty and wicked and altogether incapable of living in a community. Immediately

## *The Brotherhood of the South*

he went back to Gauguin and apologized for banging the door. He proposed to paint the *Arlésienne* again, and this time he would follow Gauguin's instructions to the letter. He owed him not only the *Arlésienne* but everything else he had done. Ever since Gauguin arrived he had felt better and his work had improved, and there was only one salvation for him and that was to be with Gauguin permanently. He also asked Gauguin to go into the park with him, as he had something very important to tell him. He did not say why he must make his announcement in the park, which was hardly inviting at this time of the year.

They strolled out into the park. Vincent simply preferred to talk in the open. When he walked about he could collect his thoughts better and give shape to them, which he often failed to do, especially in important matters. His plan was perhaps rather a curious one, or rather it might appear to be curious in the present age, whereas it would have seemed quite ordinary in the Golden Period. He thought he could now claim to know Gauguin's painting thoroughly, and Gauguin thoroughly knew his. If you regarded his own pictures objectively you would see that they lacked just what Gauguin's possessed, just the essentials. That his own lacked a great deal was, naturally, a matter of course. But even Gauguin's pictures were not quite complete; they lacked certain elements that were possibly to be found in his own painting, although whatever his pictures did possess was nothing very important. Figuratively speaking, Gauguin's art was a garden and Gauguin a gardener, or rather a landscape-garden-designer, like the famous gardener whose name he had forgotten, but who had built the park at Versailles. Now, could this man, whose name he had forgotten, have built the gardens of Versailles without any assistants, without, for instance, the people who

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executed the plastic decorations of the long avenues; could he have achieved his great work without the help of the engineers who laid the water system for the fountains, or without the designers of the flower-beds? No, he could not, and why should Gauguin not have an assistant?

Gauguin could not see what Vincent was driving at.—That only showed that nobody ever thought of communal life. Was not Gauguin such a garden-architect? His pictures were splendidly designed, with big avenues, and side-paths and open spaces. Gauguin always thought out an imposing structure with many clever details. But something was missing. His plan was generally capable of supporting a richer vegetation, many more clusters of blossom, perhaps a more generous array of colour. And therefore he ought to construct his pictures like the gardens of Versailles. He would have to bear the lion's share, to conceive the general plan, and then Vincent would come along and make the flower-beds, and the flowers, and the foliage, and put in his fountains.

Into the same picture? Gauguin inquired. Vincent's red head nodded: Of course!

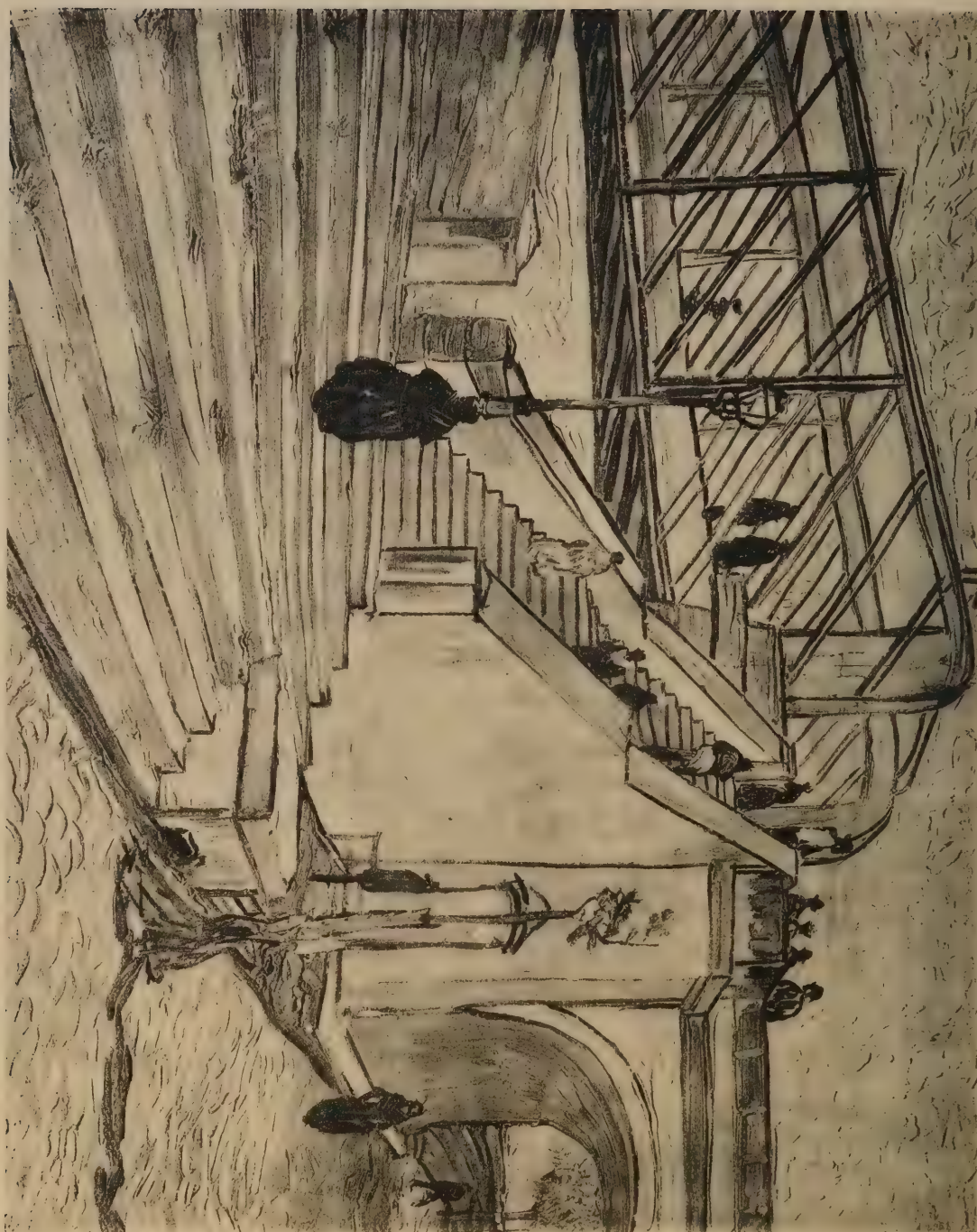
Gauguin stood still. Vincent did not notice that he had stopped, and he continued to talk as he had often done before when they were out of doors. He talked on and on, while Gauguin stopped at a corner and looked at a tree.

Suddenly Vincent heard a terrific laugh behind him. Fortunately they were out of doors, for the window panes in the yellow-house would have broken into a thousand pieces. Gauguin was yelling with laughter.

Two paint one picture! Why not three or a score? Little Bernard might join in too, and perhaps Lautrec. *Quelle blague!* And Meissonier too, it would not be fair to leave him out.







THE RAILWAY BRIDGE

1888/89

## *The Brotherhood of the South*

Vincent stared. What was Gauguin laughing at? His laughter spoiled everything. The trees, the ground and the air trembled. Why did he want to spoil it all?

Gauguin was wound up like an alarm clock, and nothing could stop him. Painting stocks and shares! *Société anonyme*! They would make a coup on the Exchange! Every one would buy shares. A gold mine!

Gauguin's jokes flew through the air. *Coup à faire! Mine d'or!*— Vincent was at a loss to understand him, he only heard the thunder of Gauguin's voice.

'Stop it!' he stammered, and his face was really funny. He had to sit down on a bench. The cypress tree in front of him was suddenly upside down and he could only see half the peonies. He held his head in his hands and glued his eyes to the ground.

'Gauguin, my dear Gauguin, just listen a minute!' He made an immense effort.

Gauguin had already departed and heard nothing he said. Immediately behind the trees was the street where the little girls lived. They laughed and twittered like birds. Gauguin went in. They had been to the Mère Chose several times before. Vincent had even painted there. He was called Fou-roux by the inmates of the establishment, and Gauguin was known, for unfathomable reasons, as Montezuma. Vincent liked going there. He had found a small brunette there who reminded him of another one in The Hague, and he adored her.

Fou-roux! Montezuma! they all shouted as the pair entered. The girls leaped towards them like soft white animals, clung to them, kissed them, and patted their cheeks. The place happened to be empty, as no one arrived so early, and the girls were delighted. Fou-roux and Montezuma! Vincent laughed.



## Vincent van Gogh

It was lovely that there were warm houses like this one in Arles. You felt as if you were in a bath and you dreamed happier dreams there than anywhere else. Vincent's brunette from Avignon wanted a five-franc piece. As he happened not to have one on him he promised to paint her portrait, and this time he undertook that she would not look like a Camembert, but like a La France rose, or like a lily.

Gauguin, as usual, had the whole crowd round him. He was the best-looking man in Arles and the strongest. Every one there longed to have him for their *Amant de cœur*. Montezuma brought them luck and he always made them laugh. He behaved to them like a prince in whose country the customs were rather rough. Montezuma made such an impression in the brothels of Rio de Janeiro that he is remembered to this day. Montezuma was a jewel, but they had to mind their p's and q's with him. While he was telling a story, he picked up the girl they called wild Nanette and hurled her across the whole room over the table on to the red sofa under the mirror; she lay there like a bundle in a corner, but Montezuma finished his story without even looking at her. If you considered the question honestly such an establishment was really much more comfortable than the yellow house, and there was really no reason why they should not celebrate Christmas there. Vincent's brunette told him that if he could not give her a five-franc piece he might at least honour her with one of his large lop-ears for a Christmas present. Then they rolled about on the floor and Vincent emerged shaking his head like a big bear who is seized by dogs. Madame Chose entered and held her sides with laughter.

Gauguin and Vincent returned home in high spirits. Vincent could not go to sleep and he got up and rapped on his friend's door. The street lamp shone on Gauguin's powerful face. Vincent stood





STREET CAFÉ IN ARLES  
QUILL DRAWING 1888/89



## *The Brotherhood of the South*

by his side for half-an-hour. Gauguin dreamed that some dark creature had bent over him, perhaps a bear with little eyes and a gaping jaw.

On the following day Vincent neither painted, nor spoke, nor ate his food. While they were sitting in the Café Giroux in the afternoon, he suddenly threw an absinthe glass at Gauguin, who dodged it, seized Vincent by the collar and hurled him out of the Café. Vincent went home and slept like a sack of potatoes. The next morning he said he had a vague memory of having insulted Gauguin and he begged his pardon. Gauguin replied that he did not mind at all, and that he was accustomed to much rougher treatment. If, however, one of those absinthe glasses should happen to hit him, he was not prepared to answer for the consequences, and he therefore thought it advisable to part company. He would write to Theo and notify him of his return.

Gauguin then sat down, wrote a letter to Theo and put the letter in the pillar-box himself. It was just before Christmas. Vincent spent half the day with Madame Chose so as not to interrupt Gauguin's packing. The little brunette from Avignon pulled his ears again, but he was melancholy. At last he told the girls what had happened. Wild Nanette wanted to rush over to the yellow house, but Madame Chose would not allow it. They were all very kind to him although he was neither strong nor good-looking and could never tell such good stories. Finally he composed himself, went to the yellow house, and entreated Gauguin. He addressed him as Master, like the pupils of Carolus Duran. They had been to Montpellier together and spent such a wonderful day there. They had talked of Delacroix and Bruyas. Other people would not perhaps count such a day as anything very special, but for him it had been almost too good, almost unbearable, and he needed a month to see

## *Vincent van Gogh*

it in its proper proportions, and anyhow they had been together there all the day.

Gauguin let him beg a long time. A common occupation did not mean that they took a similar view of life. Their ideas might differ very materially, and that was a consideration which could hardly be over-estimated.

'Yes Master,' replied Vincent, and he felt an irresistible desire to bow before Gauguin, even to kneel in the dust. He declared that vulgar men like himself were not capable of better efforts; they could not endure a beautiful day and he was quite unworthy to breathe near such benefactors as M. Bruyas. Of course it was only right to part company from people like himself and to cast them into the bottomless pit.

Finally Gauguin gave way, and he wrote a second letter to Theo, in which he declared the first one to be utter nonsense. But he refused to share the same table with Vincent for the next few days, on account of the dissimilarity in their views of life and for hygienic reasons. So Gauguin had not forgiven and forgotten everything. He insisted on his condition, and in the evening he went out for dinner alone. While he strolled about after his meal on the Place Lamartine—it was a particularly dark night—he heard steps hurrying towards him. He turned round and saw a dark figure with something glittering in one hand.

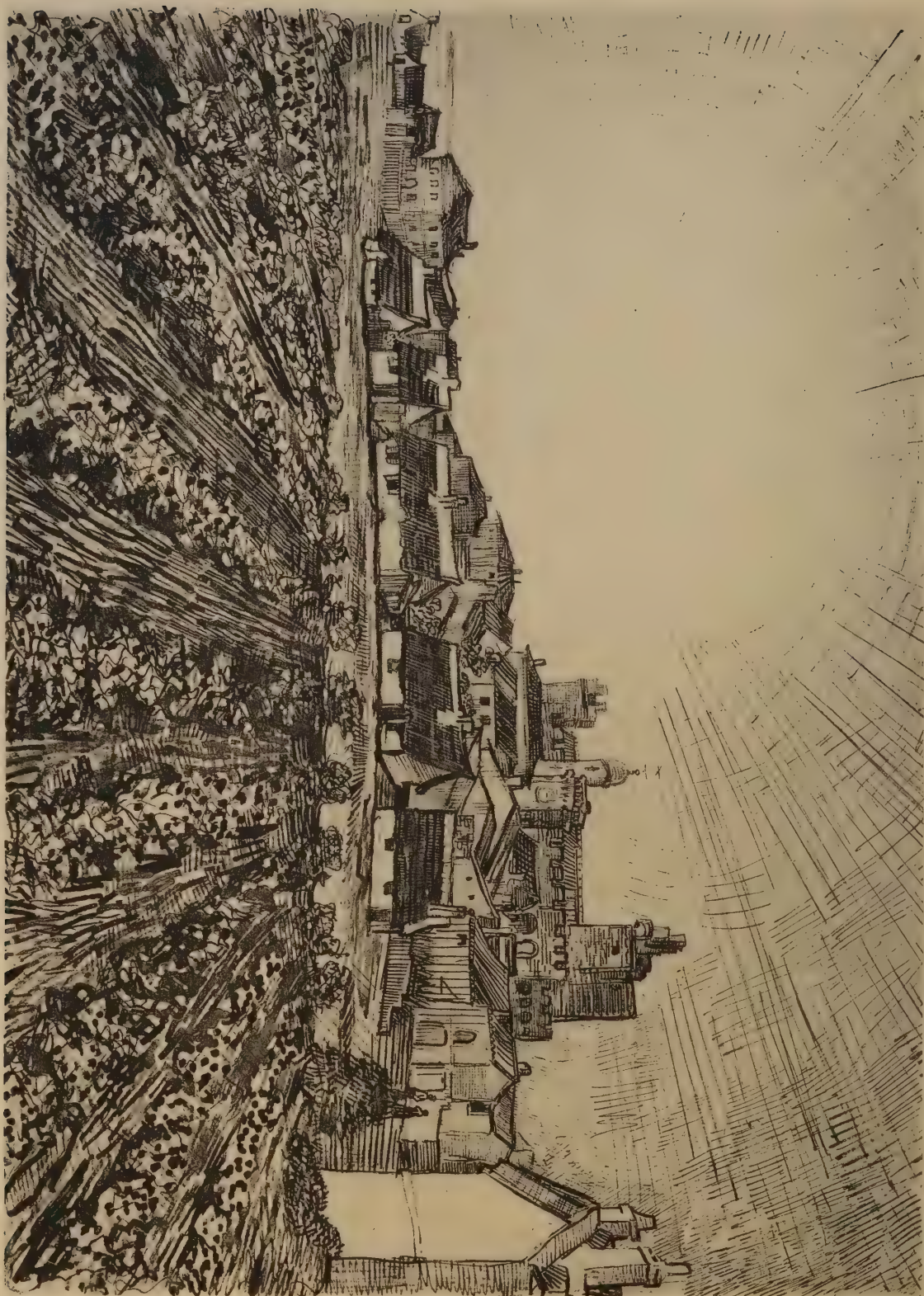
'Vincent!' he called severely.—Vincent dropped his head: 'Yes Master!'

Gauguin watched him turn tail and run for the yellow house. With the circumspection of a man who had travelled a great deal, he considered what he had better do, and decided to spend the night at an inn, where he slept the sleep of the just.

About mid-night a present was brought for the little brunette, who







MONT MAJOUR  
QUILL DRAWING 1888/89

## *The Brotherhood of the South*

was just in the middle of a dance. The present was from Monsieur Fou-roux. She opened the wrapping, then another, and another. The last one was blood-stained and contained a piece of canvas which was also soaked in blood. Hallo, Nanette!—All the girls gathered round, including Madame Chose. She looked at it. *Quel cadeau!* It was a real ear!—As soon as the little brunette realized what it was she fainted. Nanette leaped to the door. Who had brought the parcel?

He had brought it himself. Then it was not his own, but some one else's. Whose ear had he taken? And what had happened to its owner?—Madame Chose came to the conclusion that this was one of the rare occasions when she thought fit to trouble the police.

When Gauguin strolled into the Place Lamartine, refreshed after a good night's rest, he found a crowd in front of the yellow house. Somebody asked him what he had done to his friend; somebody else announced that Vincent was dead and they knew who had murdered him. Gauguin, with his usual calm, made his way through the crowd, and upstairs he found the doctor, the police, and Roulin the postman round a blood-stained bed. Vincent had been properly bandaged and was already fast asleep. Gauguin answered all the questions that were put to him with perfect equanimity. He told Roulin that he intended to wire to Paris and leave by the next train, as he did not think his presence in Arles would be of any advantage to the invalid. Roulin was the only man in Arles who could not bear Gauguin, but he approved his decision and added one or two pointed phrases in his own Tarascon dialect. After further consideration Gauguin decided to await Theo's arrival on the spot.

Theo arrived twenty-four hours later and spent his Christmas holidays in Arles. Every possibility was discussed, but Roulin's wish



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prevailed and Vincent was taken to the hospital. Every now and then the invalid regained consciousness. He recognized his brother, apologized to everybody, especially to Theo's young fiancée whose Christmas he had spoiled. He quoted the Bible to Theo and asked for the Protestant pastor in order to question him about the Gospel of St. Luke. Intermittently he became delirious again.

After the Christmas holidays Theo, worn and anxious, returned to Paris with Gauguin. Dr. Rey, the hospital doctor, nursed Vincent with the utmost gentleness. Roulin called every day. The year 1888 drew to its unhappy close, but Vincent's condition improved with the beginning of the new year. His attacks became weaker and weaker and then ceased altogether. Vincent called for his pictures and Roulin accompanied him to the yellow house. When Vincent arrived he was aware that though many aspects of life had suffered a change in the meantime, his pictures were as solid as ever. The Sunflowers, the Poet's Garden, the Arlésienne, these at any rate spelt reality.

On January the 7th he was pronounced by Dr. Rey to be fit, and he was discharged from hospital. Such cases had been known to occur; the connection with Gauguin had apparently been a misfortune. Who could judge the psychology of an artist? As soon as the disturbing element had left Vincent's vicinity his ailment was at an end. There was not the slightest trace of any abnormality of the brain. He needed good food and must avoid exertion and excitement, and the doctor was friendly.

There was hardly any fear of excitement. The quiet of the yellow house was undisturbed, even surprisingly so. Was it really necessary to have made such a mountain out of a mole-hill? Theo's journey, Gauguin's flight and all the frightful fuss. Could it not all have been



## *The Brotherhood of the South*

avoided? Surely he was as easy to lead as a child, and Gauguin could absolutely manage him. And then the whole affair had swallowed a lot of money. Or was he perhaps really impossible? First in The Hague, then in England, then with his parents, then in Antwerp, then in Paris—it was a long list. Something had always been wrong. But why? Was he one of those people, outcasts, who were simply impossible?

But he had always been able to get on with the Roulins and Madame Giroux the Arlésienne, and the miners in La Borinage. Of course talking to them was different, and there were many unmentioned subjects. Once these subjects arose everything went wrong. Superficial contact alone was possible, but could he really scramble through life with no more than superficial interchange with his fellows? If no deeper contact was possible then everything he had believed in was rubbish. Perhaps we are near the heart of his disease!

Vincent lay on his bed by the hour, lost in speculation, which was bad for him. The longer he lay there the more did he doubt the solidity of his surroundings. The walls would slant and the ceiling descend upon him. And then he would shut his eyes for two seconds, and open them again quite fearlessly. As long as he did not doubt his world, it was there. Curiously enough, while his surroundings became blurred, he saw quite clearly his parents' house in Zundert: 'Every path, every plant in the garden, the fields, the neighbours, the churchyard and the church, the vegetable garden, even to the jackdaw in the acacia tree.'

His pictures helped him more than anything else to regain control over his senses. If only it were possible always to paint and be with pictures he would not go mad. When his illness started he was just painting his *Berceuse* again, for which Madame Roulin sat to him. Vincent somehow associated the idea of the family with this woman;

## *Vincent van Gogh*

she was by no means beautiful and not a Parisian. Gauguin had even called her a horror. There was something bourgeois about her which upset Gauguin, but when you shook hands with her all explanations became superfluous. She regarded men as children who required help. She helped everybody in her own way although she had not a sou to spare. Only to look into her eyes rested you. He painted her hair a powerful orange and he made her clothes green and then placed her before a richly decorated background of green and pink. Gauguin had told stories about the solitude of seamen. If you had a picture like that in your ship you would never feel lonely. He called his picture *La Berceuse* because the thought of such a woman gave you as strong a sense of security as if you were a little child in your cradle. The canvas was painted like a popular coloured print, as if it were destined for poor people who sailed upon the high seas. He painted another variation of this theme so that there are three fairly similar *Berceuses*. He wanted to hang them up between three or four canvases like his *Sunflowers*. What a decorative scheme they would make!

When he went outside the house he pulled himself together and even paid more attention to his clothes, which had always brought him a bad name. He went in to see Madame Chose in order to ask the pardon of the little brunette from Avignon. They were all very good to him. Curiously enough the little brunette, at the same time that he was seized by his illness, had similar attacks, and had lain for hours unconscious. Madame Chose advised him to take a strong dose of salts if he ever felt a similar attack creeping on him. Vincent felt it did him a world of good to talk the matter over quietly. Madame Giroux in the café was quite unchanged. Her only comment was 'une fièvre chaude,' nothing more! She said that her husband had had a similar experience





LANDSCAPE WITH A WINDMILL  
QUILL DRAWING 1838/89





## *The Brotherhood of the South*

once during the harvest. Madame Giroux thought it was due to going about in the sun without a hat on, and these things happened especially when the mistral was blowing. Roulin, too, had heard of similar cases. And besides almost everybody in Gascony was a little bit mad; it was of the essence of the country.

Did they all say these things to comfort him or did they really believe them? He watched Madame Giroux carefully to see whether she was in any way afraid of him. In the presence of others in the café of course she had no occasion to fear anything. But one day he followed her up to an attic where she hung out her washing. She looked at him quite calmly with her large eyes and just moved the washing basket with her leg between herself and Vincent. He noticed it although it was done quite unostentatiously, and he made some remark. Perhaps he could paint Madame up here surrounded by her washing. He spoke quietly and watched the little window that let in the light. But his speech was a great effort to him and his blood leaped violently within his veins.

‘Pauvre Monsieur Vincent!’ was all that Madame Giroux said, and suddenly he felt as if a dark cloud had descended upon him and as if a shrill powerful voice was screaming at him from a corner.

He went back to the hospital for a few days. He felt that in such a condition he was better there. Dr. Rey thought that it was due to the amount of blood which he had lost, because his knife had touched an artery and also that he suffered from under-feeding. Dr. Rey’s explanation seemed very probable and especially as at this time he was short of money. Theo wanted to get married and had to arrange his income differently. It was now impossible to continue his expenditure on the scale of last year. But Vincent was used to going short of food, and even last year he had missed many a meal before Gauguin arrived.

## Vincent van Gogh

Just now, of course, good food was particularly important, but Fate decreed that just now he was to have less than in the days when he was well. And of course the marriage of his brother was a hundred times more important than any painting.

He was quite well cared for in the hospital and Dr. Rey was very kind to him. By way of thanks Vincent painted him and made Theo send him an etching of Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*. The other doctors were very kind to him too, only they seemed to be extraordinarily ill-informed about modern painting and they regarded Impressionism as perfectly crazy. It was strange that sensible people, competent in their own profession, were unable to understand the methods of any other profession. He took a great deal of trouble with them and tried to un-roll panoramas before their eyes. Gauguin would have done it better. Why had he gone away? Gauguin was presumably a kind of Napoleon. He had left Egypt and left his army in the lurch, but then he could do that just because he was Napoleon. In his thoughts Vincent always thought of Gauguin as Master. He forgot his weaknesses and remembered nothing but the loss that his departure meant to him. Again and again Vincent tried to understand why the yellow house had been deserted. Were not Gauguin and he meant for one another? Could Gauguin ever find a more loyal companion? There was still so much to be discussed and they had hardly begun to discuss even the problems of Rembrandt's *claire-obscur*. And then Gauguin, who was a remarkable artist after all, loved his stupid sunflowers and the thick chair.

At last a letter came from Gauguin. In a few words he asked Vincent to send him his foils which he had forgotten to take away from the yellow house.

Vincent suffered most from sleeplessness. He squirted camphor into





STREET CAFÉ IN ARLES

1888/89





## *The Brotherhood of the South*

his pillow and took large doses of bromide. Dr. Rey recommended him not to think so much. No doubt the excellent doctor meant well, but his prescription was useless, and after all you could only cure bad thinking by good thinking, if it were possible to cure anything at all. He felt some strange poison in his head. Delacroix also had been filled by some poison of his own which made him oppose mankind, but he possessed also poisonous antidotes. Vincent needed antidotes to his poisons. After a few days he returned to Arles, but it was changed. He had become the chief topic of conversation, not amongst his neighbours, not amongst the Giroux', but amongst the other people who had nothing better to do than gossip. The news of his sudden return to the hospital had spread like wildfire. How long would it last this time? Had he returned only to do some other silly thing? And this time perhaps it would not be his own ear. Once a man had learnt how to handle a knife he never left it long in his pocket.—The Giroux' tried to convince these people of their folly. He was only a painter, an artist! He wouldn't knife anybody.—But most of the inhabitants took a different view. They thought that his painting was the root of the trouble and had been sufficient reason for locking him up long ago. It was just this messing about with colours that was his disease. They regarded his portraits as an insult to humanity, and then he had the impertinence to ask people to come into his house in order to be made to look like that! And what a sight the house was inside! No one who had been inside would ever forget the spectacle!

The worst of all was that Roulin had taken a post in Marseilles. He came over from Marseilles two or three times, and whenever he came he went to Vincent before visiting his family, but his visits were only rare and short. Salles, the pastor, did everything in his power, although



## Vincent van Gogh

he too, of course, considered Vincent's painting as madness, but he regarded the painter as a harmless creature who at worst would hurt himself, but never others. Vincent as a matter of fact disliked this tolerance, although the pastor was no doubt an excellent man and of all pastors the most admirable. Roulin, too, had no time for pastors. When Vincent considered the matter more exactly he came to the conclusion that the loss of Roulin touched him more nearly even than Gauguin's flight. A simple soul like Roulin, who understood him—for this post-man even understood his pictures—was a treasure of untold worth.

He did not discover the commotion which he caused among the inhabitants until their faces became glued against his window panes. All day long the yellow house was besieged by a host of idlers. It was pointed out to everybody in the neighbourhood: *la maison du fou*. The yellow house became more famous than the whole of Sainte Trophime. And on Sundays it started even earlier than during the week. At first the crowd dispersed when Vincent, with his head tied up, stepped to the window. But the bolder spirits soon lost their fear. And as soon as he appeared he was greeted with a shout.—Fou-roux! Fou-roux!

Here was proof that art was not an open book to every simpleton. Probably Monticelli would have made no more impression on them, and perhaps not even Delacroix. Nevertheless, the excitement caused by the yellow house could only help to introduce Impressionism to the South, and therefore he had nothing to do but to go on with his work. The presence of these people in front of his studio could only increase the responsibility of the painter. One day he counted the crowd and there were nearly fifty. All these fifty people would one day remember the present hour. There must surely be one among the fifty who if he was shown the way would be able to understand his pictures. Surely



MOTHER AND CHILD

1888/89





## *The Brotherhood of the South*

they could understand the Berceuse, who was one of them, and the sunflowers which grew in front of their houses, or the peaches which grew in their gardens. And if only one would understand he would not be lonely for long; at first he would also be thought mad, but then he would seek the company of other lunatics. And in this way perhaps a very small and, at first, very weak society would be founded.—The idea began to take hold of him. At that time he painted his loveliest portrait of himself, the one with the fur cap and the bandage round his ears. Could such a radiant picture fail to touch these people who at bottom were after all kindly and impressionable? He understood them all just as they were, even their stupid curiosity. Of course he could see that to them a painter was an abnormal creature. Where did he come from and where was he going to? Were they not right to stare at such a conceited creature who attempted to paint nature and to turn her into a four-cornered canvas?

He tried to consider what to do. He was not oversensitive nor was he shy. The only creatures he was afraid of were the creatures he saw at night, not those who stood outside his window. He was scared only by silent phantoms and the slowly creeping terrors of the dark. Perhaps the people who were shouting outside could even help him. The right plan, no doubt, would be to pick out the right person and then quietly ask him to come in to him, then offer him a seat and continue to work peacefully. He would ask him to have a look at the pictures and not to talk before the pictures talked to him, and he would not even insist on his looking at the pictures. But what would happen if he should by chance choose one who would not be affected even by Monticelli? He ought to have been a Millet. Millet no doubt would have been able to manage them.

## Vincent van Gogh

One day in the early spring when it was already quite warm and when he was painting well, the window opened and Fou-roux addressed the multitude. It was as if a hoarse cock, who wore a fur cap, had begun to crow. The audience became hysterical with mirth. They were told something about *Le Bon Dieu* and heaven knows what else. Perhaps he thought he was some sort of a disciple. And finally he became quite wild, this queer red devil. He almost fell out of the window. The people outside clapped their hands furiously and then they began in unison—‘Fou-roux! Fou-roux!’

Vincent heard their shouts until late into the night.

Dr. Rey had forbidden any form of excitement. Vincent accordingly barricaded his window on the next morning, so that there was only a tiny slit to let in the light. The crowd howled outside and increased three-fold in numbers. He then retired to the first floor, where he could paint in Gauguin’s room. The children managed to find ladders and climbed up after him. Sometimes heads seemed to appear even through the ceiling and from the corners, and from the red floor. He threw a picture down at them, and then two, and then three. The youngsters put their heads through the canvas and danced about with the canvases looking like enormous jagged collars round their necks.

And then he screamed and bellowed like a dog who is being thrashed within an inch of his life. His shouts could be heard far across the market square.

Eighty-one venerable citizens of the town addressed a petition to the Mayor of Arles with a view to putting an end to the turmoil. They requested that the madman should be removed and taken to an institution specially designed for such people, and for which they as citizens paid taxes.

## *The Brotherhood of the South*

M. Pardieu, the Mayor of Arles, did his duty, and ordered, against the protest of the pastor, that Van Gogh was to be taken forcibly into the section for lunatics in the hospital, where he was locked up in the indiarubber cells. He was taken there in the early days of March in the year 1889. The yellow house was locked up and sealed by the local officials.

Theo did not receive this news until three weeks later. Vincent wrote that he had of course all kinds of comments to make upon what had happened. And of course he felt not the slightest resentment against anything or anybody. In the best of worlds everything was arranged as well as possible, and Theo was above all not to interfere and thereby make matters worse. Vincent was entirely convinced of the good intentions of the Mayor and of the Head of the Police. In fact they entertained the kindest feelings towards him and would do everything to put matters straight. The whole scandal, no matter how painful it was for Theo and for Vincent, could after all only prove useful to the Impressionism of the little boulevard.

His chief regret was that he lost so much time in which he might have worked. He had to face all kinds of difficulties in the hospital. On the previous occasion, when he had been taken into the hospital as a private patient, the authorities had winked their official eyes, but now they forbade him to paint and to smoke, and even to write letters. The routine of the hospital was guided by some immense power which was nevertheless capable of shades of delicate feeling, in fact one might almost call it an Impressionistic organization. Naturally Dr. Rey could not be blamed. Dr. Rey was only an infinitesimally small particle in the whole organism. Dr. Rey had to obey its rules and regulations like every one else. Nothing could be simpler. And besides, how could he



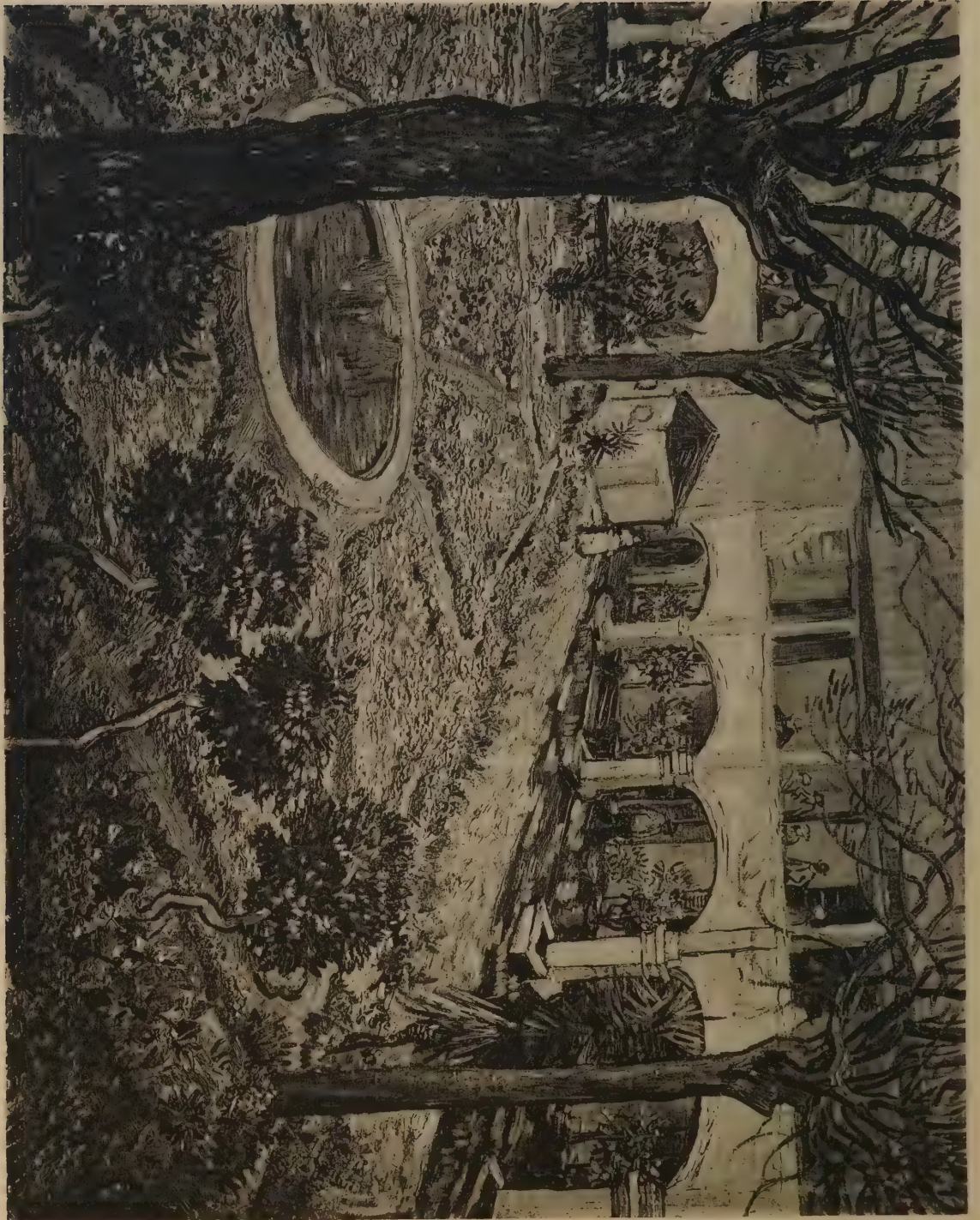
## *Vincent van Gogh*

know whether perhaps smoking and painting were not harmful, and possibly even writing letters was bad for him? Rey at any rate showed how warm-hearted he was by allowing Signac to pay him a visit a few days later. It so happened that Signac was working somewhere in the neighbourhood in Cassis, and Theo had asked him to look after Vincent. Rey even permitted him to go for a short stroll into the town, and he was allowed, of course under the supervision of the Police, to show his pictures in the yellow house to his friend. Signac liked them, or at any rate pretended to do so. In fact he really seemed to appreciate them, and he asked Vincent to come to Cassis, which though an admirable suggestion, was of course quite impossible. At any rate there were other people in the world besides the eighty-one cannibals in Arles.

Roulin, too, paid him a visit from Marseilles. His simple quietness was like a balm. Roulin who would never escape from the deadly burden of his routine really suffered more than any one, although he never showed it. Roulin was really a perfect example of goodness and showed a tenderness for Vincent, not like the tenderness of a father towards a son because he was too young, but like the tenderness of an old soldier for a tenderfoot. Vincent felt that he had not the slightest right to be embittered, quite apart from the fact that his situation might have been much worse.—There were other examples for him to follow. In an old newspaper he found the translation of an inscription on one of the ancient tombstones in Arles: 'Phebe, daughter of Telhui, Priestess of Osiris, who never complained.'—Who never complained! When you read an inscription like that you felt an ungrateful black-guard! What was this power that restrained Phebe, and Roulin, who never complained? Nothing but the simple joy of living in the South! It was nearly as beautiful again as it had been the previous year. If only







THE ASYLUM IN ST. REMY  
1888/89



## *The Brotherhood of the South*

it didn't cost so much money! If only it were possible to recover the twenty francs for the new gas installation from his greedy landlord!

Theo tortured himself in trying to discover what he ought to do. He was about to get married into the bargain. His fiancée of course did not possess a penny. They had to find new rooms, and how were they to do it? Perhaps Theo would have to give up his marriage for the sake of his brother, but marriage for Theo was the only anchor in the sea of his disappointments. He had his troubles, in fact it seemed as if everything that happened to Vincent sooner or later became Theo's tragedy. Would it not be an excellent thing to have a family? Perhaps Vincent would be able to share the joy of it if Theo could found one.

Vincent was quite convinced of it; it would be an excellent plan for everybody. He saw a great future to Theo's marriage and he already loved his fiancée like a being from another world. He regarded the marriage as a gift of the gods. If you marry you carry the South in your heart. And as Theo would not be able to give him so much money, he would simply find some other solution. Vincent gave his heartfelt blessing to the marriage. Salles, the pastor, made superhuman efforts on Vincent's behalf. After a few weeks the doctors certified that even if his attacks should recur it was impossible to regard him as a danger to the public, and even if his painting was a trifle unusual it could not be considered anything in the nature of a public menace. The authorities accordingly gave their sanction for his release. Only he was advised, for the sake of the inhabitants, not to return to the yellow house. Salles made inquiries; Dr. Rey had a house in a quiet street in which he could give Vincent two rooms for six francs a month, water included. Vincent would be quite at home there. But at the last minute Vincent shrank from the proposal. He could not start another ménage; it was too much

## *Vincent van Gogh*

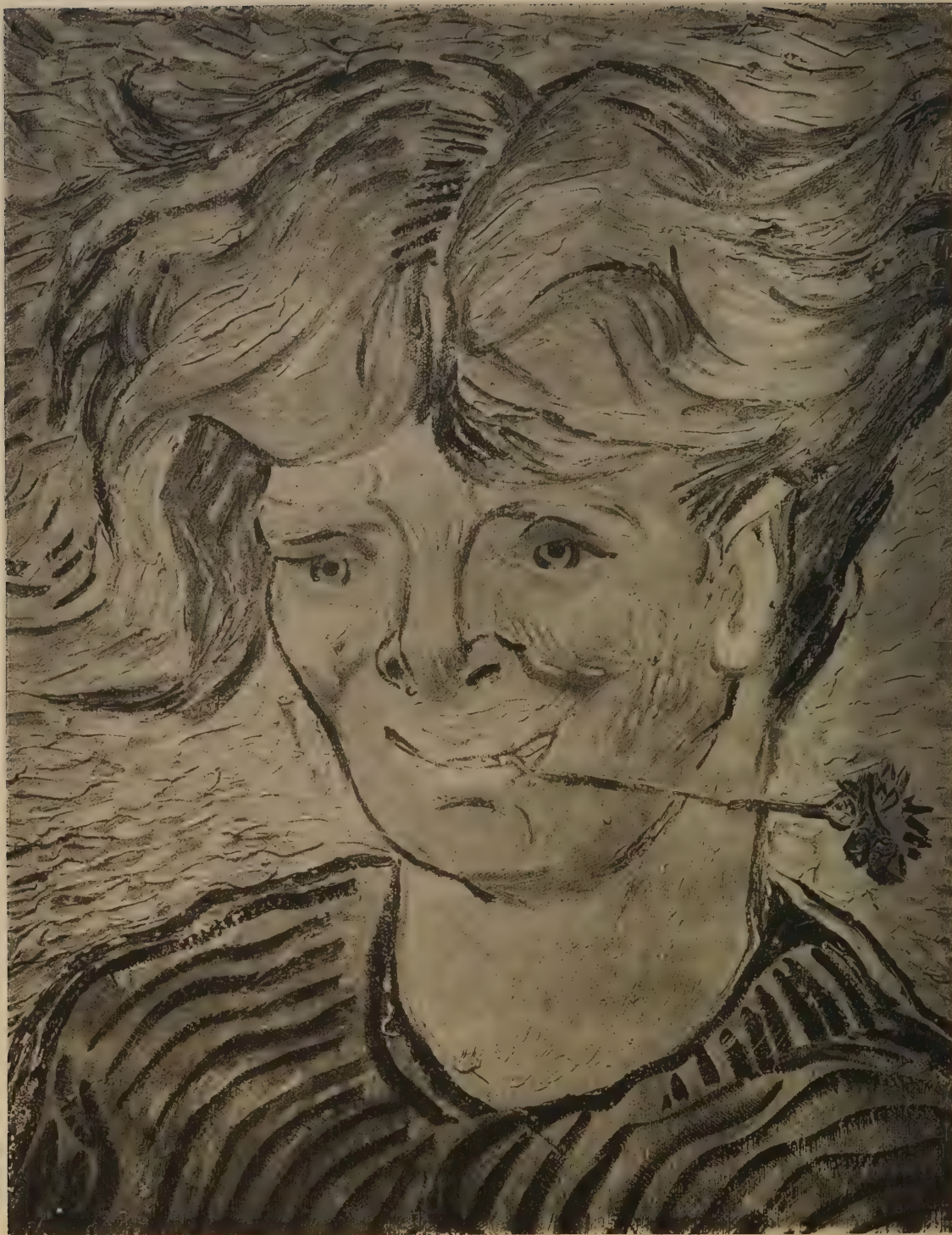
for him. The effort seemed to him too big an undertaking. He could not face the removal and the possibility of having to lay on gas once more and the daily thought of the money that he was spending. Such a mode of life demanded presence of mind and a cool and level brain. On the other hand, in these public institutions everything was arranged for you without your having to bother about details. If you were subject to an illness you must just arrange your life accordingly. Presumably if you had a free choice you would select a different mode of life, but even this one was by no means the worst that could be imagined. 'This disease is perhaps as much a part of some men as the ivy is of the oak.' He could no longer bear being alone, nor could he tolerate the howling crowd outside his windows. Perhaps it was all only imagination, but then you have to reckon even with imagination and emotion. Vincent at any rate could never move into another house like Dr. Rey's house without Gauguin. Why, oh why had Gauguin run away so suddenly? He would have given anything to become his humblest slave.

Vincent did not wish to pretend that he was untouched by all the needs of other men. Sometimes he had terrible longings, 'Storms of longing, wild as furious waves beating against the rocks, longings to embrace some one, any one, a woman, no matter who. Of course it's nothing but over-excitement and hysteria! Perhaps that is all that love is in reality. Dr. Rey considers love to be nothing but a bacteriological disease. And you can object to that as little as to the natural Christ of Renan, who, after all, is a far more comforting creature than the paper saviours who are served out in the local ecclesiastical establishments.'

Dr. Rey continued to be most kind. The best plan would be to stay in the hospital, but of course he could not do that permanently. The rules of the hospital laid down that either you were released as cured







THE MAN WITH THE CARNATION

1888/89

## *The Brotherhood of the South*

or sent to a proper lunatic asylum. He would rather go to such an asylum than be alone and at liberty. He was by no means well, and would not be for a long time, although, of course, he did not give up hope. In fact he wanted to be taken to an asylum as soon as possible.

Theo was thunderstruck when he received the news. It was true then! And was everything really finished?—That a man should be destroyed thus by the spirit which others denied him! It is the revenge of an immeasurable injustice. Theo, too, must share the blame. He blamed himself because he had left his brother alone ever since the early days in Holland and because he had clung to his business instead of going with him. Here a man was sacrificed and slowly tortured to death only because he was less of a failure than his fellow-men, only because he had great thoughts others were breaking him. They had done the same to Christ. The world treated Vincent no differently, only the form of his execution was changed.—From that time Theo's health was impaired.

But Vincent was far from desiring to be regarded as a lamb led to the slaughter. He wanted anything rather than a fuss. He was already allowed to work again. He started another Berceuse which promised well. He was also given permission to read, and began Dickens' Christmas Carol. He enjoyed the curious story and began to make comparisons with Carlyle. He also determined to read Carlyle's 'Frederick the Great.'—He was perfectly satisfied. He had packed up his pictures in the yellow house and had reviewed all Theo's kindness in the process. When he looked at them all he felt ashamed of Theo's generosity. He could not judge whether there was anything lasting in his pictures, but he knew that Theo's goodness would never pass away. Theo had given away his goodness and yet retained it. What an



## *Vincent van Gogh*

achievement! The effort had perhaps embittered him not only because of his financial struggle. Many a time he must have felt the pangs of doubt and despair and been hurt, perhaps by the inconsiderate violence of Vincent's demands. Who knows how much he had to suffer! And yet his kindness never failed and he had never reproached Vincent. That was goodness!

Such blame as there was could only attach to Vincent himself. The doctors found all kinds of explanations and it was no use quarrelling with them. And in the previous year he had, as a matter of fact—just to heighten his yellow more and more—added occasionally to his powers with alcohol and also with coffee. And perhaps he had suffered because he had worked in the heat out in the open. He realized that he had never known how to keep to the middle path, or to see life in its true proportions. Heaven only knows what he had done without knowing it!

The asylum by no means alarmed him. An asylum was alarming only from a distance. When you are in it you can adapt yourself. If you are amongst other madmen you are not treated as an exception. Nothing is worse than being an exception. Close to Arles there is the asylum of Saint Remy. He had been told that it was an admirable institution, only it cost eighty francs a month. Theo was to make inquiries. Of course there were other considerations which weighed against it apart from the fatal expense. He had thought of trying to join the Foreign Legion. They accepted people up to the age of forty and he was only thirty-six. Roulin was also in favour of this plan. And in a barracks you were sealed as secure as if you were in an asylum, and it cost nothing into the bargain. He could paint there just as well as anywhere else. If only he was allowed to paint nothing else mattered much.—He was told that in Saint Remy his liberty would be severely restricted. He would not be







VIEW OF ARLES

1888/89

## *The Brotherhood of the South*

allowed to go out at all and it would be impossible to paint out of doors. Perhaps the Foreign Legion would be preferable. Soldiers are not so particular, and by joining the Legion you might perhaps get to Arabia. Arabia must be a wonderful place. The only objection to it was the examination which you had to pass before you could join. Perhaps famous painters of soldiers like Detaille or Caran d'Ache, who of course had friends among the military authorities, could bring influence to bear with a view to his being accepted. And he could see from Milliet that he would be able to get on easily with soldiers.—Are we not all soldiers?

Theo was on the rack. The story of the old mill at Rijswijk haunted him.—Then one went that way and the other this way.—Theo immediately realized what his next step ought to be; no one but a brute could fail to realize it. Jo, his young wife, realized it too, but she said nothing and waited for Theo to act. If Theo resolved to take the step she would be quite prepared to share in it. There were moments when he was firmly determined to go to Arles and fetch his brother, and then stay with him always.—No, it was no mean motive that held him back. The obvious step meant salvation for both of them or disaster for them all. And success did not depend on his good intentions, no matter how good they were, but on a factor which was incalculable. The obvious solution brought a threat in its train. There was a sinister threat in everything that Vincent did, although he did not know it. Theo's solution might endanger the new home that he had created. In his heart of hearts Theo knew, only too well, that such a step would bring danger with it. And the idea of danger throttled his determination. How could he fear his brother, whom he loved more than any one else? Yes, more than any one else, even more than Jo. Jo was a gift of the gods, and Theo always wanted to thank her, for he owed all his happiness in life to her.



## *Vincent van Gogh*

But she was a new element in his life and was to some extent, therefore, external, whereas Vincent was inextricably bound up with his very being. Nothing could alter the story of the mill at Rijswijk. Perhaps Theo would have chosen a different path, but he could not. No matter how roundabout their paths had been, they always converged ultimately, and there was something sinister in their meeting. Theo would like to be gay and to laugh occasionally like Vincent. Sometimes he could not understand how Vincent could be so contented. Was it his illness that gave him this capacity?—It was not right to live with such an invalid, not even if the invalid is your own brother. It is impossible to help such people. ‘Nobody can help him,’ he said to Jo. Theo said it twice.—And somewhere, from a dark corner, he heard an echo: ‘No, you cannot.’

Not even Vincent’s art?—Anybody can perceive that his work contains no sinister element. Any one can perceive its significance, even people whose judgment is not warped by stories about an old mill. Down there in the South lives the master of modern times. All the deviations from his path, which used to disquiet Theo, now seemed to him to be necessary détours in the ascent. Nobody could doubt Vincent’s ability from the day that he reached Arles, and no illness in the world could alter the fact. If Vincent had not made such unattainable demands upon mankind he would never have become ill. Some one ought to have fulfilled his needs, and any one who knew him could have fulfilled them. Some one had even promised to do so at the old mill of Rijswijk. And were his demands wild? Were they not rather practical demands both in their form and content? The form of his demands was bound to be unconventional in order to preserve the purity of its content. Vincent remained pure, no matter what the world did to besmirch him.

## *The Brotherhood of the South*

He had succeeded in preserving his innocence. All his struggles had been struggles to preserve the purity of his childhood. Neither his nature nor his colours, but his childhood and his innocence had reached perfection. His work was the work of a man who refused to allow the world to dull his earliest faith. If every one worked as he had done the world would not sink lower and lower but mount higher and higher to heaven. Theo—have you done everything that you could do—you, the only one who recognized him? You have given him money. And is money enough?

Theo wanted to tell Jo that he ought to sacrifice the hope of a family and his profession rather than give in to the fear he felt. Something within him told him that he ought to go to his brother and say: 'Brother, here am I.'

But if he did this what would happen to Vincent's painting?

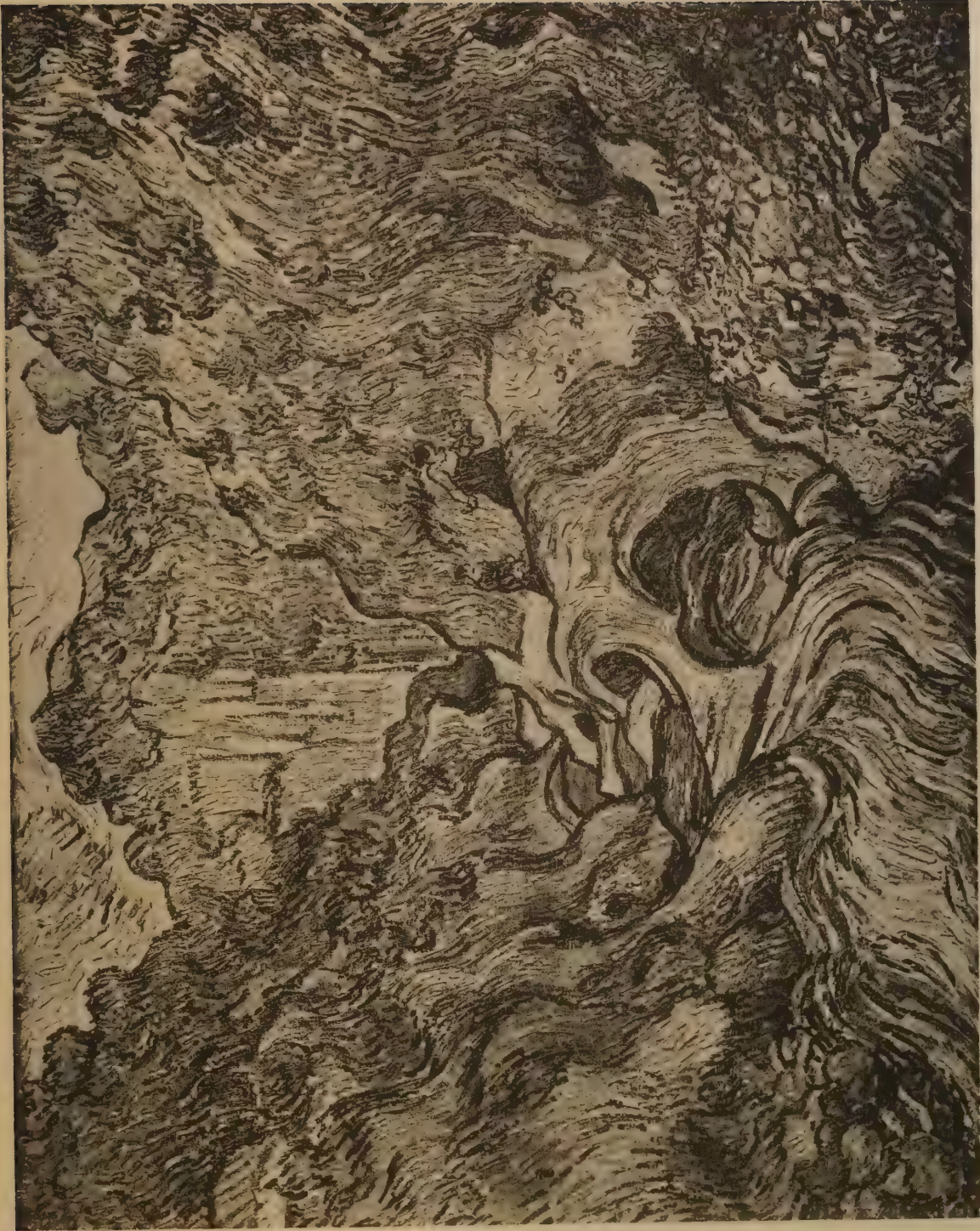
Theo's thoughts were like a snake that bites its own tail, and men make a habit of thought, in order to avoid the necessity for action.

Theo considered every possibility. All night he sat and conducted a complicated correspondence with all sorts of doctors and asylums. Dr. Rey believed in Vincent's ultimate recovery, but considered constant medical supervision necessary. He thought that the attacks would come again and that they would not be any less violent for some time to come. The ideal solution would be to find rooms for Vincent in the house of a sympathetic doctor, where Theo could go over to see him every Sunday. One day perhaps he and his family would settle down near him. The elder Pissarro, who lived in the country, offered a room to Vincent, but he refused. He knew his limitations, and although he knew how happy he would be there, he contented himself with saying that he hoped to accept the invitation in a few years, perhaps.

## *Vincent van Gogh*

Theo aged during these weeks, and Jo suffered too. He could not sleep at night and his office hours in the Goupil Gallery were purgatory. While he was still writing letters and looking about, Fate took the necessity for a decision from him. On May the 8th, Pastor Salles took Vincent into the asylum of Saint Remy.





LE RAVIN  
1888/90



*Chapter VII*

*The Cloister of Saint Remy*







THE REAPER  
1888





## *Chapter VII*

# *The Cloister of Saint Remy*

SOME one who passed through Saint Remy at that time told a story about a red-haired painter, who sat there and covered canvases with thick colours, while another lunatic sat near him and scratched the paint from the pictures. The lunatics used to help each other in this and in other ways. Anyhow they were more kindly than the eighty-one monsters of Arles. If one was obsessed by untidiness and dirtiness, another suffered from a passion for making everything tidy and clean. If one of them smashed everything he could lay hands on, all breakable objects were removed, and if two started to beat one another they were separated. The management of the asylum counted on this kind of assistance from its patients, and only paid attention to peculiar patients. If any one went too far he was put into a strait-jacket and into a cell which they called the bathroom. It was not one of the best asylums, and suffered from a certain stagnation; moreover, the institution was short of patients. Apparently there were more lunatics at large than there were locked up here. About thirty large rooms stood empty which could have been turned into excellent studios and would have been large enough to house Vincent's entire community. If you were not altogether sound in health and suffered from fear you were quite happy here. The shouting of your comrades was no worse than the hooting of the crowd outside the yellow house. If, on the other hand, you felt well, then residence in the cloister was less agreeable.

Vincent did not give up hope by any means. He felt that he must fight against his illness and obey all the regulations carefully, but he did

## *Vincent van Gogh*

not feel the necessity for paying any particular attention to his doctor. Dr. Peyron, the manager, was very friendly and patient, but he seemed to derive little pleasure from his profession, which was hardly surprising. Vincent had above all to learn how to take care of himself. He regarded all disease as either a step to recovery or to destruction. As long as he felt hope he considered that he was in the right place and therefore must put up with petty annoyances. But once he gave up hope he would long for nothing but the grave. The asylum had the advantage of affording him an opportunity of observing others, with a view to finding clues to his own condition. His life-long habit of observing nature was of assistance to him. He found, for instance, that much talking about art harmed him. As his powers were limited he determined to use them only for what was essential, and he tried to acquire the slow pace and the solemn quietude of a man like Roulin. His illness was by no means chronic and at present, at any rate, it occurred without apparent provocation at intervals which he might learn to gauge. His chief aim was to recognize the causes of his fits and thus to avoid them. Perhaps he could learn to obviate the causes and to make his attacks less wild, but above all he wanted to be able to regularize them. He had heard of a Russian writer who used to calculate the occurrence of his epileptic fits quite calmly and arrange his work accordingly. He could, of course, form no picture as to the nature of his attacks, because his information depended upon the testimony of comrades whose mental deficiencies had to be taken into consideration. He knew that they were violent because, for weeks after they occurred, he felt shaken and only regained his strength gradually. He made great efforts to discover when his mental powers weakened; he wanted to know whether his letters to Theo were clear or not and whether he formed sound judgments about





FOREST SCENE

1889





## *The Cloister of Saint Remy*

the books he read. He read a great deal again as he used to, and he had got Theo to send him an English edition of Shakespeare. He was struck anew by the Rembrandtesque qualities of the poet and the Shakespearian qualities in Rembrandt. He also enjoyed reading Voltaire. The work of such strong sane men was an antidote to his illness. Vincent's companions of course regarded his books and his pictures as his disease. Even Dr. Peyron did not approve of his reading, and as soon as his condition weakened at all he was not permitted to paint. Vincent thought it a pity because books and pictures, especially pictures, fortified his spirits against his fits. When everything went well he was allowed to use one of the empty rooms as a studio, where he saw the plain and the hills through large windows. And when he had been very well indeed he was allowed to paint in the garden. This garden was filled to overflowing, and cared as little about the doctor and his patients as the patients cared for it. Vincent found it difficult to convey the prodigality of this wilderness of flowers and bushes. Now of course he did not work as furiously as during the last summer, and he gave up his wild pursuit of yellow. It was good for him to paint more temperately, and Gauguin had been right in his objection to all exaggeration. If you could place your colour carefully and quietly on the canvas you would not be regarded as a madman; that was the point.

So far everything was all right, but the conception of sense is capable of various interpretations. For example, his pictures of the garden with the stone seat are sensible, and you can count each carefully drawn leaf, and several other still-lives belong to the same category. Such sensible canvases always date from critical periods. And his immensely moving, crazy landscapes from Saint Remy, in which every stroke of the brush betrays his excitement and his emotion, were the products of his most

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peaceful moments. And it is not surprising, for the ability to tame and co-ordinate such powerful masses requires a cool and capable brain, whereas painting one leaf by the side of another requires no more effort than the act of sitting down. He painted much less than he used to even when he felt well. He painted less in order to gain control over himself, and to save money. Theo must spend his money on his family and not waste it on 'abstract' painting. The restraint which Vincent put upon himself hardly did him any harm, for he could gauge his work better when he was more restrained. He did not paint any more at the bidding of his demon, but, as he said, in order to divert himself. And for this reason his usual tension was slackened a little, and the organization of his canvas sometimes changed as a result. Vincent's technique gained in agility and his colour ranged beyond the narrow scale of his Arlesian pictures. At this time he made the discovery of his cypress trees. He animated the foreground of his landscape with small wavy lines. The bushes in the middle distance became rather more curly, and possessed a certain Rococo charm. The sloping horizon was built up of inclined planes, and the sky, which occupies two-thirds of the picture, can only be compared to the wild fugues of a baroque composer. The cypress trees stood in such a landscape, 'fair as an obelisk,' and the wild curves of his structure gained in solidity and unity by being joined to the tall cypresses. Did his picture resemble the landscape which Vincent saw? Certainly not in a way which would have caused Gauguin to stigmatize his work as naturalistic; he would rather have called it a decoration of undulating trees and towering mountains and wild flowers. And yet his fields and bushes, his trees and his mountains were linked so organically by the many curves of his brush that they convey the essence of what he portrayed. His pictures resemble a



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carpet, in which the sunlight has made the pattern grow into flowers and trees.

No man could be unhappy who painted these pictures. As long as his illness did not interfere with his painting Vincent was content to be an invalid. He owed much to his complaint, he owed peace and rest to it. He noticed how badly he needed to practice drawing again. He fetched out his old drawing grammar by Bargue which had served him in La Borinage and began the old exercises again. He enjoyed copying the well-known patterns and it helped him in his technique. Delacroix had once said that he had only found the secret of his technique long after he had lost his teeth.

Vincent even succeeded in cheering Theo, who had never got over his depression since Vincent went to Saint Remy. Jo was expecting her first child, and as neither of the parents enjoyed particularly good health they reproached themselves and commiserated with their infant before it was born.—Could anything be more absurd? Surely because they were ill and sad that was no reason why their baby should not arrive as happily in this world as the youngest Roulin, who was born while his parents were at the height of all the misery they ever experienced. Vincent enjoined his brother to let nature take her course and to be grateful even for a sickly child. Would they love it any the less? And was not love more important than a thousand diseases? If only they could hear the birds sing in his garden and see the old gold of the withered grass!

Dr. Peyron gave him permission to take his easel into the open, and so he painted the fields, the cornfield with the sower and the large sun. His picture was painted in luminous yellow and the hills were a violent coloured blue. He intended the cornfield with the reaper to be a pair

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to this picture. He wanted to put a suggestion of death into his reaper, but without any tragedy, and he painted him as lightly as the sower. He wanted to suggest a devil who fought with all his titanic powers in the heat of the day. He pictured a devil in the sun who could not bear to wait until he had reaped the last blade of his harvest.

When he was half way through his picture, he had a rather worse fit than usual. He screamed so violently that the people rushed into the field where he was struggling with the yellow devil. His throat was so inflamed with shouting that he could not eat any food for four days. His fit was perhaps due to his visit to Arles. He had gone there to pack up the pictures and he had spoken for a moment to Madame Giroux. Perhaps he ought not to have seen the yellow house again so soon. It was always easy to be wise after the event. He had to stay in his room during the whole of August and September, the best time for the autumn colours. He even avoided the others. He had to be still more careful than he had been previously and to avoid any exertion. He had to learn to be a coward, yet he was not afraid of losing what little was left to him of his allotted span, but he was afraid about his work. There was still so much for him to do, which could not be done without exertion. The whole of his life seemed to him useless if he did not achieve this work.

When he recovered he finished the reaper, not in the open, but behind his barred windows, where he also painted two portraits of himself and the portrait of his kindly warder with the face of a beast of prey. And then he painted a picture which expressed more or less what he meant to express, a picture which almost satisfied him: 'the Garden of the Asylum'. It was the incarnation of joy and suggested the very smile of life. Originally the asylum had been a cloister and the former uses







PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN

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of the place were expressed in Vincent's canvas. It looked more like a radiant palazzo of the South, where only happy men had lived. The whole picture was radiant, not only the smiling garden, but the verandahs and the people on them. Vincent concluded that joy and art had much in common; they were found long after your teeth had fallen out.

Then he turned to the olive trees. His passion for work returned and his fits returned also, but this time they were milder and shorter, though accompanied by strange religious fears. Memories of his preaching days came back to him and other experiences which he had got over long ago. He had really been much nearer to madness in London and shortly after, whereas now only a stupid external aspect of his illness remained. God had ceased to inspire him with terror. God was nothing but endless and kindly sunshine, and it was only the pastors who tried to darken the vision of Him with their stories. Just as some one had turned this cloister into a lunatic asylum filled with so-called sisters of mercy, so the pastors had turned the teachings of Christ into a sinister legacy. And his last attack was presumably only caused by this cloister of madmen.

Theo, who was kept informed by Dr. Peyron and had Vincent's letters as well, realized the tragic circumstances only too well, and he lacked the cheerfulness which seemed to help the invalid over every attack. Vincent did not send the fruit of his labours as regularly as he used to do, and Theo felt his judgment waver occasionally, for he looked first, not for the artistic merits of the pictures, but for an indication of the condition of the patient. Such a method of looking at pictures brought Theo little joy. In bygone days his misery at the Goupil Gallery had been compensated by his intercourse with his brother. But

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now every envelope that came from Saint Remy was like a threat. Matters grew worse and worse every day at the Gallery. The firm departed more and more from their proper programme, and they only suffered Theo because his was a nature that would suffer all. They did nothing to help Vincent to publicity, and not a single one of his innumerable pictures had yet been sold. Vincent took every opportunity to praise his brother as the only sensitive man in the trade. His praise was even more oppressive than the censure which he used to suppress. Theo's young wife saw the endless letters and began to ask questions. Theo hesitated. Was he to burden her with all these worries just when she was about to become a mother? Sometimes he felt a deep hatred of all pictures. They were like poison, and perhaps the child would be healthier if he had had no art in his blood. Occasionally pictures arrived from the South which reminded Theo of evenings in Paris when the two brothers had struggled in vain to set the heavy machinery of hope in motion again. And where was the truth, in Paris or in Saint Remy? In the old days he had asked himself, Paris or The Hague, Paris or Drenthe, Paris or Nuenen, Paris or La Borinage? Theo cursed himself for always asking questions.

But when he really spoke to Jo about his brother he suddenly became fluent. He was aflame, and his words flowed from him so that his wife looked up in surprise, and even Theo was surprised at himself occasionally. The dark veil fell from him and he seemed to be endowed with powers that came from a far distance. The crude colours which had frightened Jo grew together and their small room was filled by a new radiance. Theo interpreted every line, every tone, and explained the smallest details like a pupil who has hovered day and night about his master. On these occasions Theo's insight went far beyond all







CYPRESSES

1889



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personal questions and he recognized the goal that lay before his brother. He pointed out to Jo what Vincent had tried to do, where he had nearly succeeded, and where he had lost sight of the goal. Jo listened. There was a strange music in Theo's voice which sounded like an accompaniment to the coloured harmonies before her eyes, and seemed to make her more familiar with them. He read in these pictures as if they were pages in an old family Bible out of which the father told sacred stories at night time. Theo, at such moments, saw Vincent not as his brother, but as a rare guest; a guest with a bloody head and a humble mien, on whom he dared not look from reverence.

Pissarro lost his mother and his eyesight was so affected that his friends feared the worst. In these circumstances Vincent was prepared to accept the invitation Pissarro had extended some time ago and wanted to join him immediately. When he received better news Vincent gave up the idea again. He determined to make a success of his olive trees this autumn. Their leaves shimmered sometimes green, sometimes blue, sometimes silver, and the soil beneath them ranged from pink to purple and from orange to the deepest ochre. There was an immense amount yet to be done in this country, and he felt he could not leave it until he had the country, as it were, inside him. Of course he looked forward to the North, which would not be quite a new place to him and for which he would need quite different means. The South had given him a training, it had sharpened his tools.

Here and there Van Gogh began to be noticed. Octave Maus, the organizer of the exhibition of the *Vingt* in Brussels, allowed himself to be persuaded by Theo to invite Vincent to send something to their next exhibition. Père Tanguy wanted to have some more pictures for



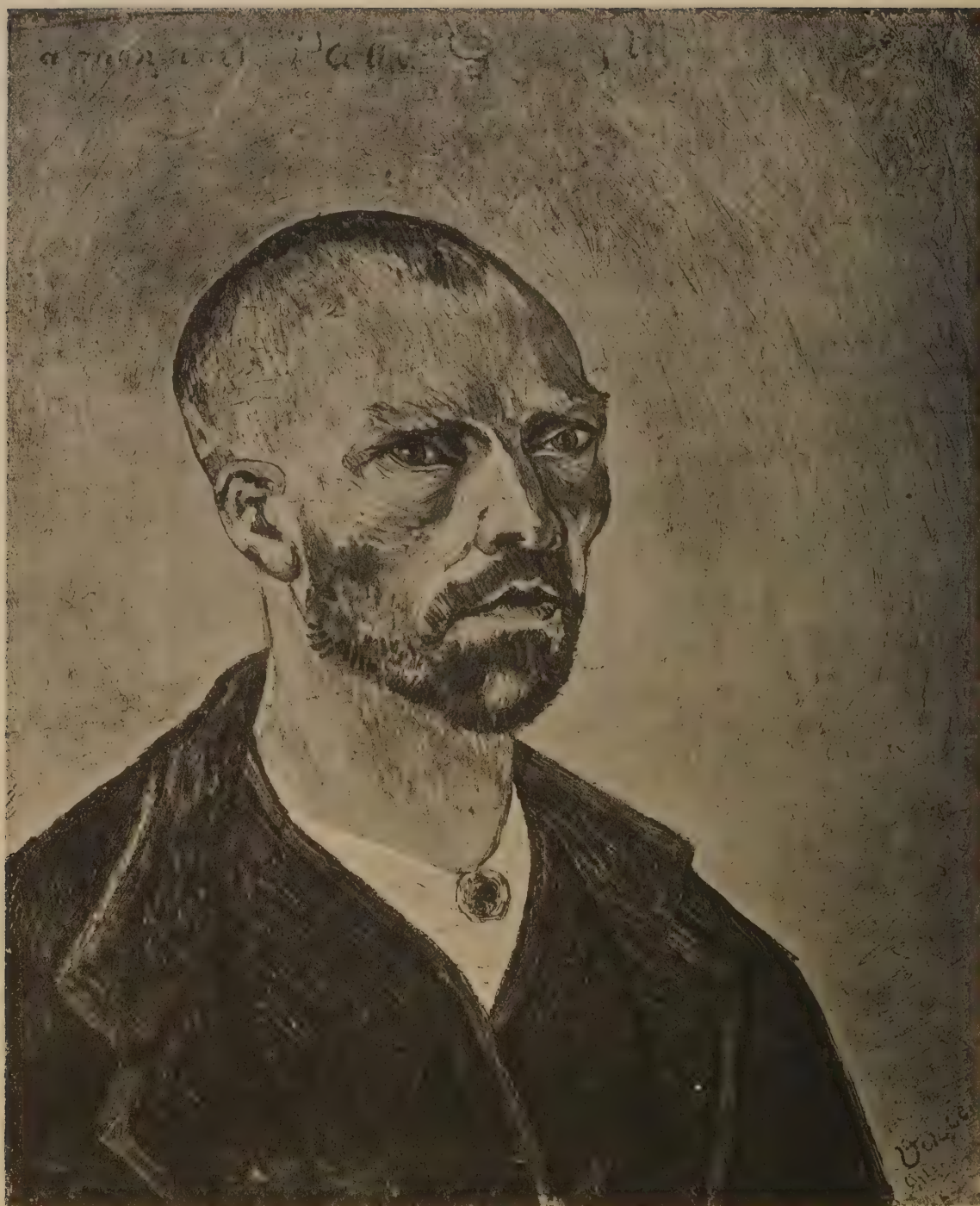
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his shop, and Isaacsohn, a gifted journalist, intended to write a criticism in one of the reviews.

Vincent was quite prepared to talk about the exhibition, although he failed to understand why Maus should happen to light on him. Nevertheless a few of the pictures might perhaps interest artists as attempts at a Southern landscape, and possibly they might incite one of them to make a journey to Provence. He would make his choice very carefully. For instance, he might send two Sunflowers, one of the pictures with the ivy, one of the blossoming gardens of Arles, one corn-field with the rising sun, and the vineyard with Mont Majour. These pictures formed a kind of ensemble. On the other hand he would not hear of an article, and Mr. Isaacsohn was requested to refrain from putting his kind intentions into practice. In another year's time perhaps Vincent would have given the characteristics of the South clearer shape. A few good days awaited him in the autumn, although of course there were no vineyards in Saint Remy. As he had been very quiet for some time he was allowed to go to the nearest hills. There he created in one day while the mistral blew—he had to tie his easel down with stones—*Le Ravin*, the precipice of rocks with the little river painted in rich purple tones and in a style which seemed Japanese to Vincent because of its decorative effect. Later on he repeated it in an even richer version. It was a gobelin made of glittering stones instead of threads, and it looked peculiarly stiff at first sight. Only gradually do we perceive life and vegetation emerging from a mass of line and colour. What a sensation when the whole mass begins to move! It is one of his masterpieces, and he reached the limit of his powers in this picture. We breathe more heavily in front of it, as if we were walking between two walls of immense rock.

Theo warned him against exaggeration of style. He approved of all





PORTRAIT OF THE PAINTER DEDICATED TO GAUGUIN

1889



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spontaneous effort, but he felt that Vincent must at last find his way from improvisation to completed forms, as Cézanne had done in his own way. Vincent agreed that he was not concerned with any particular kind of style. He regarded all abstraction which tilted at reality as nonsense. Style was only a means to heighten reality, and heightening of style demanded the sacrifice of all superfluities. Vincent was not blind to the dangers of his work. He realized that all art, even the simplest, was beset by dangers on every side. And he determined to evade them all by circumspection. At this time Gauguin and Bernard sent photographs from Pont Aven of their latest pictures, religious *motifs* of an entirely new and highly dubious kind. Perhaps they were thinking of the Pre-Raphaelites? Why all this tomfoolery? Instead of calling themselves primitives, they ought first to learn to be primitive human beings. Where did all this religiosity in Gauguin come from? Bernard's saints were creatures without bones. If there was anything religious in art at all it surely lay only in the way art was approached. The name you gave to your models and your pictures was immaterial.

He did not express himself quite so violently, but such was the trend of his thoughts. It is possible that the bigotry of the sisters of mercy in the cloister for madmen had roused his opposition to anything that was associated with the Church. He had a loathing for these sisters, with their starched religion, who saw in their patients not invalids but men possessed of devils. He would like to have sent them to learn a little decent feeling from the inhabitants of the house of Madame Chose.

Although it was beginning to freeze he painted out of doors the main street of Saint Remy, which was just being paved. He painted the heaps of sand, the houses, the people, the disorder of the paving-stones, and there was light and life in his picture. Then he settled down to

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paint the olive trees. After he had made a great number of studies he finally painted the two versions of the olive harvest. They were painted much more lightly than usual, with shaded patches and only a thin coat of paint underneath. He painted the picture of the rain and the picture of the street with the new pavement, both done at this time and in a similar manner. He found that by this means he economized in colour and also gained for his objects a richer spiritual significance. Cézanne knew very well what he was about when he painted thinly. It was a means of clarifying your work and of averting accidents. And incidentally this method carried his Impressionism from the little to the great boulevard.

Once more during the most peaceful work his illness attacked him. Theo asked Pastor Salles to go at once to Saint Remy. Vincent had already left his bed and was annoyed with Peyron, who had written to Theo behind his back. A fit in a lunatic asylum was after all a usual occurrence, and he was only too thankful that they did not occur every week. He asked Theo not to pay any attention to such an occurrence; he would regard it as a great kindness if they took as little notice as possible of such accidents. All that he objected to was that the last days which could be spent in the open slipped by unused. Now it snowed, and he had to play cards. The close of the year was hardly brighter than that of the previous one.

He sat behind his barred windows. The snow settled on the iron bars and made them thicker and the spaces between them smaller. Sometimes he sat perfectly still for six hours without moving a muscle. The others came to see what he was doing and asked him to join them. During the last weeks he had almost forgotten his companions. For a little time he could forget them and then they were there again, just as

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they were before with just the same faces. He pulled his chair a little nearer. Perhaps it was wrong of him to want to get away from them, but he, who believed in brotherliness, hated them. No, he did not really feel hatred, he felt something worse, disgust. He could not help but feel disgust, it was the barometer of sanity, and he knew that if he lost his disgust he would lose all hope of recovery. As soon as his disgust slackened a little he spurred himself on, and regarded his fellows closely until it made him quite sick. What disgusted him was nothing less than their whole existence. They spent half their time in swallowing the food the asylum provided for them, and the other half they spent in digesting it. Was it conceivable that he would one day descend to a similar condition? Perhaps every one in such an asylum became like that sooner or later; that was what you were there for. The kindly warder with the face of a beast of prey would tell you so as often as you cared to hear it. That was what you were there for. You could do nothing against the asylum even if you cut yourself off from the others. Except when he suffered from an attack, Vincent took only bread and water so as not to become a slave to the greed of his fellows, and he often reduced his rations to the minimum in order to be as little of an animal as possible. Of course Peyron was not to know anything about it. Peyron's ambition was to have all the inmates as fat as possible, and especially those who had been recommended to him. These doctors were really most remarkable people. The asylum served a most peculiar purpose, and presumably charitable people like the eighty-one cannibals in Arles contributed towards its upkeep. There was never the slightest attempt to induce its inhabitants to any other activity than eating, except praying, a proceeding to which the sisters attached some weight. The warder, before he came to Saint Remy, had been in the



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asylum at Mont Evergues. There the patients had to work and there were no praying sisters. The asylum there had a smithy, a cobbler's shop and a carpenter's shop. It only cost twenty-two sous a day and the asylum even clothed you.—Did they recognize painting as work too?—The warder smiled.—Van Gogh suggested impatiently that in that case he would learn to be a smith or a carpenter. Anything was better than his present form of life. Places like the cloister of Saint Remy dated from the Middle Ages and ought to be razed to the ground as soon as possible.—The asylum of Mont Evergues, however, was only for mild and curable cases. Any one ought to be able to see that, for it was impossible to give real lunatics tools to play with. Imagine the tables and the boots they would make! Such at any rate were the views of the kindly warder.

Vincent, however, inquired whether all the inmates of Saint Remy had been serious cases from the beginning. Surely some of them had been quite mild cases, people who were just a little daft, or people who thought too much, as he did for instance. Presumably they didn't consider him one of the serious cases?

The kindly warder smiled. At bottom he was probably not far from the frame of mind of the people over whom he kept guard. It became clear to Vincent that he could not remain in Saint Remy very much longer if he ever hoped to get out of it again.

When Pastor Salles came the next time he told him so quite simply. He insisted that it was not safe to stay much longer. The pastor replied that Vincent's inclination was entirely in accordance with the wishes of his brother, who would be delighted if he would come to the neighbourhood of Paris. Theo would find a place somewhere in the country. The pastor told him that he could go there any time he wished and



LANDSCAPE

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that Theo had written about it particularly on two separate occasions.

Theo was a saint. He had written on purpose. What the pastor said was not one of the comforts that were served out to invalids. Most people would have said: 'You will come out all right to-morrow, or the day after, only you must stay here quietly to-day'. But when Theo said anything, he meant it, and if necessary he would come and fetch him himself.

It was a comfort to hear the news from Salles, only he must not be too hasty. He would have to take a long journey and there would be all kinds of complications, and he might perhaps faint on the way. Why could he not stay with a friend somewhere near by? Was Gauguin happier in Pont Aven than he had been in Arles? Perhaps they could have remained quietly in the yellow house after all?

However, it had been settled, and he was to leave. Where he should go must be considered with due deliberation. Anything rather than haste! Perhaps it would be better to wait until the spring, for then it would be warmer when he reached the North. He would need to be particularly strong to face his new surroundings.

His chief works during the winter were copies. He had already begun in the autumn when he was not allowed to work in the open, and he regarded this copy work as compulsory. He would never have done it but for his illness. His natural inclination had always been to paint portraits of his contemporaries. He wanted to create portraits as he had created landscapes and, if possible, even simpler and profounder than his landscapes, as convincing as a picture-book was to a child. What he aimed at were pictures of human beings with the simplicity of the stone statues in old churches, but he wanted to endow them with the flesh and

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the spirit of the present day, because even modern men and women, no matter what they do, must have expressions in their faces, and if they have expressions, he ought to be able to portray them. Perhaps the modern doubt concerning the expressiveness of faces was only due to a lack of strength in the people who tried to portray it. Or perhaps it really had ceased to exist? If so, of course there was little left for art to do.—Pictures like the *Berceuse* could only be regarded as a beginning, for such a picture did not possess enough of the spirit of his time. Others would come after him to continue his work; his poor head was not a match for the task.

He did not begin to make copies from lack of imagination, for any one who loves Nature can find *motifs* enough if he has a single flower, or a peasant's chair, or a street which is being paved. His desire to make copies was caused rather by the opposite, by the necessity to restrain his imagination. And there was perhaps another cause which he did not understand quite clearly, a form of secret longing, which was connected with Montpellier and Bruyas and the yellow house. As his yellow house had changed into a cloister of madmen, he wanted at any rate to create such a house in his pictures. As he could not manage to get along with Gauguin he would try Millet, Delacroix, and others; perhaps they would be more patient with him. As a matter of fact, his copies were not copies at all. Theo sent him reproductions, woodcuts, etchings and lithographs, and Vincent made pictures of them. He turned their black and white into his colours and transformed their *motifs* into his rhythms. Sometimes his work was comparable to re-composing chamber music for brass instruments, but more often it was a dramatisation and always a creative undertaking. Some of the pictures he used as patterns can be compared to pieces of metal which are dipped in an acid and then drawn





A ROAD IN PROVENCE

1889/90





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out again covered with shining crystals. Sometimes these crystals express the substance better than its original form, as if they had been intended for this purpose, although their maker had forgotten to complete them. Such was the case with Millet. At last the Sower was produced—Vincent's dream from the beginning, the very essence of his work and his life. He also painted the Angelus, and the Woodcutter, and the Diggers, and the woman teaching her child to walk, and in fact the whole of Millet. After a struggle of many years as a draughtsman, Vincent had succeeded in removing all the sentimental superfluities of Millet's work, and in reducing it to its simplest structure. His simple forms were now clothed with a brocade of yellow, blue, red, purple and orange. He added no unnecessary decorations, the structure remained structure as naked in its boldness as ever, only even more powerful. Vincent's rich strength filled empty spaces that cried for colour, gave life to trees and a meaning and a voice to mute symbols. His work was a transfiguration, a transformation of one energy into another, which involved no loss but showed improvement in every detail. The original picture, although its copy resembled it closely in outline, really disappears entirely.

Millet's *Sower* is an invented sower who is burdened with the artist's thoughts; he is but a creeping shadow on a ploughed field which is only a field of the imagination. Another peasant ploughs near the horizon with his oxen, or rather there is a silhouette plough with motionless animal silhouettes, in front of a sky of canvas in which birds cut out of paper attempt to flap their immovable wings. In Vincent's picture a peasant strides across his field, you can feel the very substance of the air. The strength of his motion carries you with him. Hundreds of sowers were embodied in one figure. He strides along, not for you,

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not for art, not for Van Gogh, but for his work, with every nerve stretched to its purpose and every limb and every rag on his body forming part of his action. The field is ready to receive the seed. There he ploughs, here he sows, and in the background the ploughing still continues. Not a detail in the action is left obscure or isolated. The animals, the earth, the man, everything is but a part of growth, and the air is heavy with the coming harvest. He strides there, not for to-day or to-morrow, but as he strode a thousand years ago as a peasant of Provence, as a Greek, or as a tiller of the soil of Egypt. Sowing is the symbol of eternity.

The element which Van Gogh gave to his copies was neither colour nor lines which might have had only an ephemeral value, but he created a solid structure. Millet's *Sower* belongs to other days, to the days of Millet's bourgeois symbolism. Van Gogh's matter-of-factness and his heroic simplicity are such, that in a few centuries his copies will be regarded as the originals, and Millet's originals as weak imitations. Van Gogh's creations are more akin to Daumier, and they are cleansed of all the superfluities with which Millet burdened the tradition of his ancestors. But Daumier, with his satire, lacked the faith to create such a sower.

In this way Van Gogh cleansed and purified the work of many others, and the peculiar tendencies of his being were brought to light. Clothed in his mantle, Breton and Meissonier became quite tolerable, and worse rubbish even than theirs was turned into art. He was like an inspired actor who is attracted by a vulgar play just because it offers special opportunities for his genius. Vincent of course regarded himself only as a performer who plays the music of others, and the others were always Beethoven. When he was really faced by a Beethoven his powers failed him. His 'Lazarus' after Rembrandt lost almost everything of





LES BUVEURS (AFTER DAUMIER)

1888



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Rembrandt and acquired merely modern colour. Delacroix' *Pieta* and his *Good Samaritan* gained only coarseness, although the scene with the Good Samaritan was rather like the Ravin. But even when he painted after such masters his work did not only coarsen the originals. Van Gogh drew harmonies from his Beethovens, with which a rougher world will make its music. The group with the Good Samaritan was capable of supporting Vincent's powerful decoration, and the truth of his gestures and expressions was strong enough to give his picture a quality otherwise peculiar to primitive art. He did the same thing with Daumier, although he lacked all Daumier's satire, which he succeeded in transforming without any vulgarity. Who can but envy him his ability to-day, when bitterness is on every lip and every heart is tortured by a longing for what the age refuses us? Was it easier to overcome the scepticism of Daumier? Why did this attempt not lead to passive neutrality, or the bitter resignation with which we accept destruction to-day?—Because Vincent never dreamed of overcoming anything. Of course he sacrificed a hundred charms which were denied him, the understanding of the Ancients, the twilight of Rembrandt, and the wonderful cloak of satire. Vincent could never have spoken had he been clad with such a cloak. But did his creations need the protection of modern garments? He saw nothing to laugh at in them, far less anything hideous. To him they were all men like the kindly warder with the face of a beast of prey, like Roulin, like himself and like every one else who belonged to his world. The only difference to him was that the traces of their cares, their work and their misery had been raised into the realm of creation. All that he could do for them was to move their shapes into the brightness of the day. He put down on his canvas plain statements about the sower, and the baroque of Daumier shone from



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his structure of unbroken waves. Vincent's method was by no means as far-reaching or as all-embracing as that Cézanne employed, when he made a copy of a Poussin 'after nature,' and there was no necessity for it to be so; Vincent's copy was no less organic and no less necessary.

At the beginning of February he received good news from Theo. In fact a whole bundle of good news arrived. Theo had become a father. The boy, contrary to all expectations, was a healthy child.—Vincent laughed: contrary to expectations! It was more contrary to expectations that he was happy in Saint Remy. And as this experiment had, contrary to expectation, been brought to a successful conclusion, perhaps it would be repeated. The little Bruyas was a kind of security for the future. The little Bruyas would do all the things that his stupid and weak grown-ups had left undone. Little Bruyas was a treasure, and although it seemed daring to believe that by the time he reached maturity people would still think of painting, it would at any rate be wise to introduce him to the blessings of art as soon as possible, and to prevent him from becoming an art-dealer. Contrary to expectations also, one of his six pictures, the red vineyard with Mont Majour, had been sold at the exhibition of the *Vingt*, moreover it had fetched four hundred francs and had been bought by a Belgian lady who was a painter herself.—Theo also sent the copy of the *Mercure de France*, which contained Aurier's article. It was a rhapsody about the colour of the pictures in Arles, and was full of glowing metaphors. Van Gogh was said to be the herald of the necessary purification of modern art, and the no less necessary purification of modern society. Van Gogh was the torch-bearer of the age, and this was said by a representative of the youthful literature of the day, almost of the future. France of tomorrow acclaimed the School of the South.

## *The Cloister of Saint Remy*

The article was the most unexpected item of Vincent's bundle of news, and could only be read with mixed feelings. If you left out of account the subject of the article and the youthful exaggeration of its author, it was impossible to deny that it had been written by some one who understood his business. And Monsieur Aurier had as an author as good a right to exaggerate the results of his observation as a painter to exaggerate the tones and colours he sees, in order to express himself. Such thoughts were a means of bringing author and artist together, and they were of help to the little boulevard. Only of course the article happened to be, not about any old subject, but about Van Gogh. It was all very flattering, but it had come to the wrong address. The only man to whom this article could really apply was Monticelli. How dreadful that the young author had not said a word about Monticelli! And if he must talk about one of the younger generation, it could be no one but Gauguin. Vincent immediately wrote to explain at length to Monsieur Aurier how much he owed to Monticelli, who was the real founder of the School of the South, and he sent him one of his pictures of cypress trees, which in his opinion showed how much he had learnt from Monticelli. He requested Monsieur Aurier to be so good as to go over to Theo and examine Monticelli's flower-piece carefully. The rest he had learnt from Gauguin. Vincent explained that it was indefensible to ascribe a new principle or anything of the kind to him, as opposed to the Impressionists. Such a distinction of personalities could only serve to make him ridiculous. And as to his flower-pieces, he could only advise Monsieur Aurier to look at the roses and the irises of old Guost, or the admirable peonies of Jeannin. The observations Monsieur Aurier had made were perfectly right, but did they not apply in a far higher degree to Jeannin and Guost? And finally, he was deeply pained, in

## *Vincent van Gogh*

spite of the beauty of his article, by his incomprehensible attitude to Meissonier.

Nevertheless such an experience and his good news encouraged him in his work. If he had been prepared to believe all the author said, he might have surrendered himself entirely to his colours and become a composer of colour harmonies. Such a method however might fall short of the truth in practice, and he had better stick to his guns. On the other hand, there was nothing to prevent him from using the four hundred francs for the red vineyard to go to Paris to make the acquaintance of Jo and little Bruyas. Only before he went he wanted to paint a few more pictures. Perhaps he would succeed in expressing the Spring in the South—it was his third one now. Just then he was painting the branch of an almond tree which seemed quite promising. He intended to paint whole trees, and if possible whole orchards in this free and rich manner. If he could do it he would succeed in rendering the blossoms more completely than he had done two years ago in Arles.

The fit seized him again, and again during an expedition to Arles. He wanted to pay his rent for the room in which he kept his pictures, and had taken another picture with him, another version of the *Arlésienne*. He spent two days in his attempt to get there, and one of them he spent in an unconscious condition somewhere. The picture he had taken with him disappeared, and he remembered nothing. He was brought back to the asylum with difficulty. His illness was unfathomable, and as uncontrolled as the wind; it cared nothing for any article, nor for any little Bruyas, not for work, and not for blossoms, and it always destroyed the hopes he had so carefully nursed. The third Spring in the South was spoilt.

This time the attack lasted longer than ever, almost two months, till







FIELDS  
1889/90



## *The Cloister of Saint Remy*

the end of April. At any rate he was not allowed to paint until then. All this time he had to sit there without moving, just like the others. For two months he was an animal, and it lasted so long only because he was not permitted to recover more quickly. A little insight and a little kindness could have halved his torture. The most pointless mechanical work would have been a blessing. Was there not in Paris or in Holland an asylum like the one in Mont Evergues, where he could be a carpenter or a cobbler? The compulsory idleness after the attack which gave you time to think and worry about it, was the best means to assure the recurrence, and so it went on and on. Dr. Peyron was very kind, and the sisters were admirable people, only Saint Remy did not suit him. The South as a whole did not agree with him, and his illness was somehow connected with it. He must get away at any price and as soon as possible! The whole undertaking in the South was a bankrupt venture.

Theo had got hold of an address from Père Pissarro in Auvers sur Oise, not far from Paris, where there was a doctor, Dr. Gachet, who not only understood such cases, but was a friend of all the world and a friend of art. He was ready to take him in, and so he would go to Dr. Gachet.

The journey as such did not frighten him, and he would not hear of Theo's idea of sending a companion or coming himself to fetch him. If he did, he would not go at all, for he was not one of the dangerous kind. At most a warder could accompany him to Tarascon, where he had to change into the express. Should anything happen on the journey his fellow travellers would help him. There were plenty of kindly people everywhere and he did not anticipate a crisis because his anger at leaving the South without having painted it properly was far stronger than his madness. And besides he could now count upon a prolonged respite.

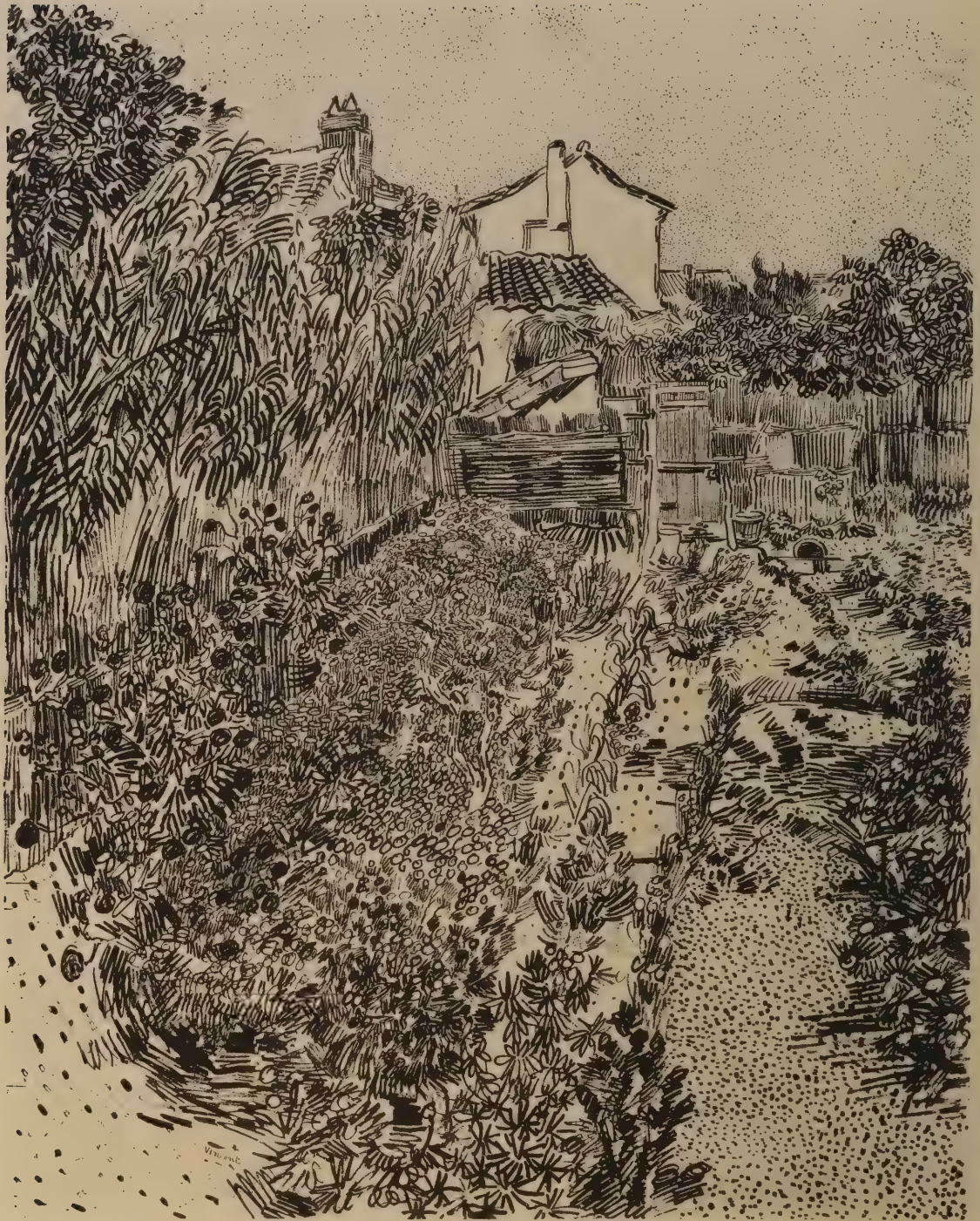


## *Vincent van Gogh*

The sheer fact of having arrived at a decision exercised a beneficial influence upon him. He came to regard his companions and the sisters in quite a different light, and he felt a certain sense of compassion for them. Everything he heard about Auvers was very satisfactory and the release from this cursed cloister alone was bound to work wonders for him. And the North, which was a new country to him now, and the new family were all a form of treatment which was bound to do him good. Before he left he painted a few more flowers. His illness puzzled him more and more every day. Just then he felt stronger than he had ever done in his best days, and as happy as a child. His brush moved almost like clockwork, of its own accord. His 'Lazarus' after Rembrandt and the 'Good Samaritan' after Delacroix were each painted in a single day. He also painted two flower-pieces of irises, which might have interested Monsieur Aurier. One of them was painted in gentle tones of green, pink and purple, the other was suffused by a warm Prussian blue. These flower-pieces contained a certain new element, they were not as violent as the sunflowers in Arles, more intellectual in style, and their general appearance was lighter and gayer. They looked almost elegant by the side of the sunflowers. Monsieur Aurier had probably only seen the old Parisian flower-pieces, which also had a style of their own, only they were more ordinary, based on an older convention, and revealed less of the particular nature of the object. Now his general style had emerged from the particular. His irises and roses represented nothing but irises and roses, but they represented them with an intensity he had never hitherto attained. Men who had lived in a happier age might never have perceived such flowers, they were the products of a vision which only the longing of a man of to-day could perceive. The style of these flower-pieces did not conceal the humbleness of their







A GARDEN  
QUILL DRAWING 1889/90



## *The Cloister of Saint Remy*

origin, but, on the other hand, it represented an individual achievement.

Perhaps his venture in the South was not quite bankrupt after all. Vincent sat amongst flowers and was smothered by them. His gratitude once more drowned all his misery. Was it right to quarrel with the rain which had produced such glorious colour and the scent of a rose? Here was something which he would carry to the North with him. The limitations by which he had been confined had been an obstacle to his art, and he saw no reason to be satisfied with his achievements in the South. But he had still less reason to be dissatisfied with his fate. If he was worried and restless because he could not paint his beloved Southern Spring, it had at any rate one advantage, and that was that he had not yet reached the end. If he had met with no obstacles he might perhaps have drained the cup too soon. But now his cup was filled again to overflowing as in his first summer there, and he had barely put it to his lips yet.

Even the flower-pieces of Saint Remy have something of the feeling of free copies; they were work imposed upon him by force of circumstances, because he was not allowed to paint in the open. In fact in many ways they are more like copies than his pictures after Millet. He did not fail to notice it. Could he ever hope to paint in the open again without any restraint? If so he would no doubt find the South even in Auvers.









THE RETURN FROM THE FIELDS

1838

*Chapter VIII*  
*The Last Attempt*





## *Chapter VIII*

### *The Last Attempt*

THE nightmare of the cloister of Saint Remy ended on the 17th of May, 1890. A warder accompanied Vincent as far as Tarascon, the home of Tartarin, and then he travelled alone all night to Paris. He reached his journey's end according to plan. His brother was waiting for him at the Gare de Lyon, and Vincent laughed at Theo's anxious expression. Life was not as serious as all that. In fact his condition was really less serious now than it had been four years ago, for he had brought something with him on this occasion. The South was a queer place. Only yesterday he had painted another still-life of roses, two greens, two pinks, before a yellow back-ground, that was all. The picture seemed to him quite passable, although a long way behind Monticelli. It was possible that the pictures he had painted during the last days in the South might repay his travelling expenses. Theo would see for himself, as soon as they were dry they would be sent to him. There was not sun enough to paint pictures like that in Paris, but instead he might perhaps paint one of the shops with their show windows, one of the yellow bookshops in the gas-light. Artificial light had attracted him for a long time, and he wanted to paint an empty street with its lighted lamps in the early morning.

The two brothers were laughing gaily as they entered the Cité Pigalle, where the young mother had waited for an hour at the window. What a good woman! Jo was most surprised, she noticed nothing strange in her brother-in-law except his ear, which she did not dare to look at. He betrayed none of the unintelligible elements in his letters,

## *Vincent van Gogh*

seemed healthier than Theo; he was thoughtful like a carpenter, spoke Dutch and cracked jokes. First of all he rushed to see little Vincent. Was it really necessary to cover him up with such a gorgeous quilt? And where was the rocking chair? And why had they given him the stupid name of Vincent? Did not Bruyas sound better? Bruyas, Bruyas!

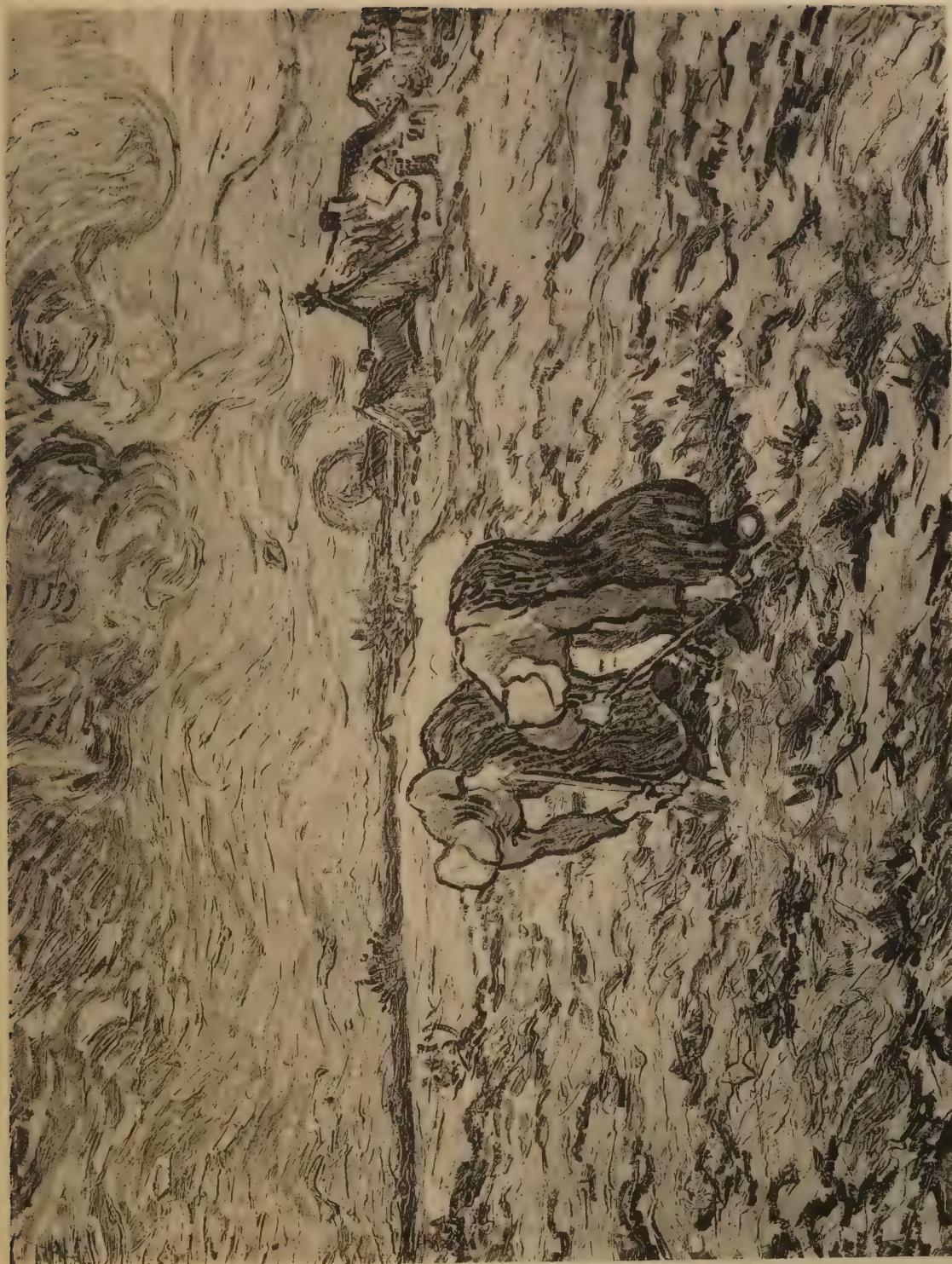
‘Ah, but don’t cry, my little one. I won’t eat you. To judge by his voice he might turn into a Courbet.’

Then he rushed to the pictures and hardly waited to have any food at all. In fact he never ate as much as the townsmen, who could never get enough. Butter and cheese and jam, and even eggs in the middle of the morning! Did they think they could replace fresh air by it? But he owned that he had never tasted such good bread either in Arles or in Saint Remy.

He fetched out every one of his pictures, and in five minutes Theo’s tidy little flat was in disorder. There was not enough room to spread them, too many pictures and no money to show for them. What was the matter with the art-dealers? Perhaps he ought to paint the Ardappeleters again, without their dirty colours. It might be worth while to do so now, because the Ardappeleters had only been a beginning. When you looked from the Ardappeleters to his present collection, you could not but praise his progress. Although by the side of the South what he had done was only a tiny step forward.

He could not wait to clear away, but rushed to the Louvre. The Old Masters looked down upon him as secure on their height as ever, while he grovelled below. Delacroix and Rembrandt! No. Rembrandt and Delacroix! To the School of the South Delacroix was perhaps the greatest painter, because he contained Monticelli and all the others. There was more in the South of Delacroix than in the North. All the





DIGGING (AFTER MILLET)

1889/90





## *The Last Attempt*

glories of the South were united in him, the Venetians and Raphael and Rubens. Perhaps one day there would be a new School of the North, for whom Rembrandt's portrait of himself with the scarf on his head would signify more than all the joys of the South. He at any rate would have been lost down there without old Rembrandt. Anything that was worth while in the Ardappeleters he owed to him. Delacroix was the painter he needed to have with him always, who answered all the problems of every-day life. But he needed the old man with the scarf for special occasions, and without such special occasions all painting was useless. If people took it into their heads again to paint portraits, real faces, they would have to go back to Rembrandt, they would never be able to get on without this neglected old drunkard with his dirty scarf. Was there not blood on it? Had he, too, cut off his ear?

The next day Vincent visited his brother in the *entresol* in the boulevard, and then ran up the Rue Lafitte to Duran Ruel, and then to all the little dealers till he reached Père Tanguy, and then, as in the old days, he climbed on the omnibus Clichy-Odéon to cross the Seine to the Luxembourg. From the Luxembourg he took the short cut to Sainte Sulpice to the Delacroix-chapel. Paris still smiled upon him as she had done four years ago, and was just as inviting, just as inscrutable. Paris was no place for simple people, and it had not done Theo any good either. He looked older than Vincent, and always evaded questions about his health.

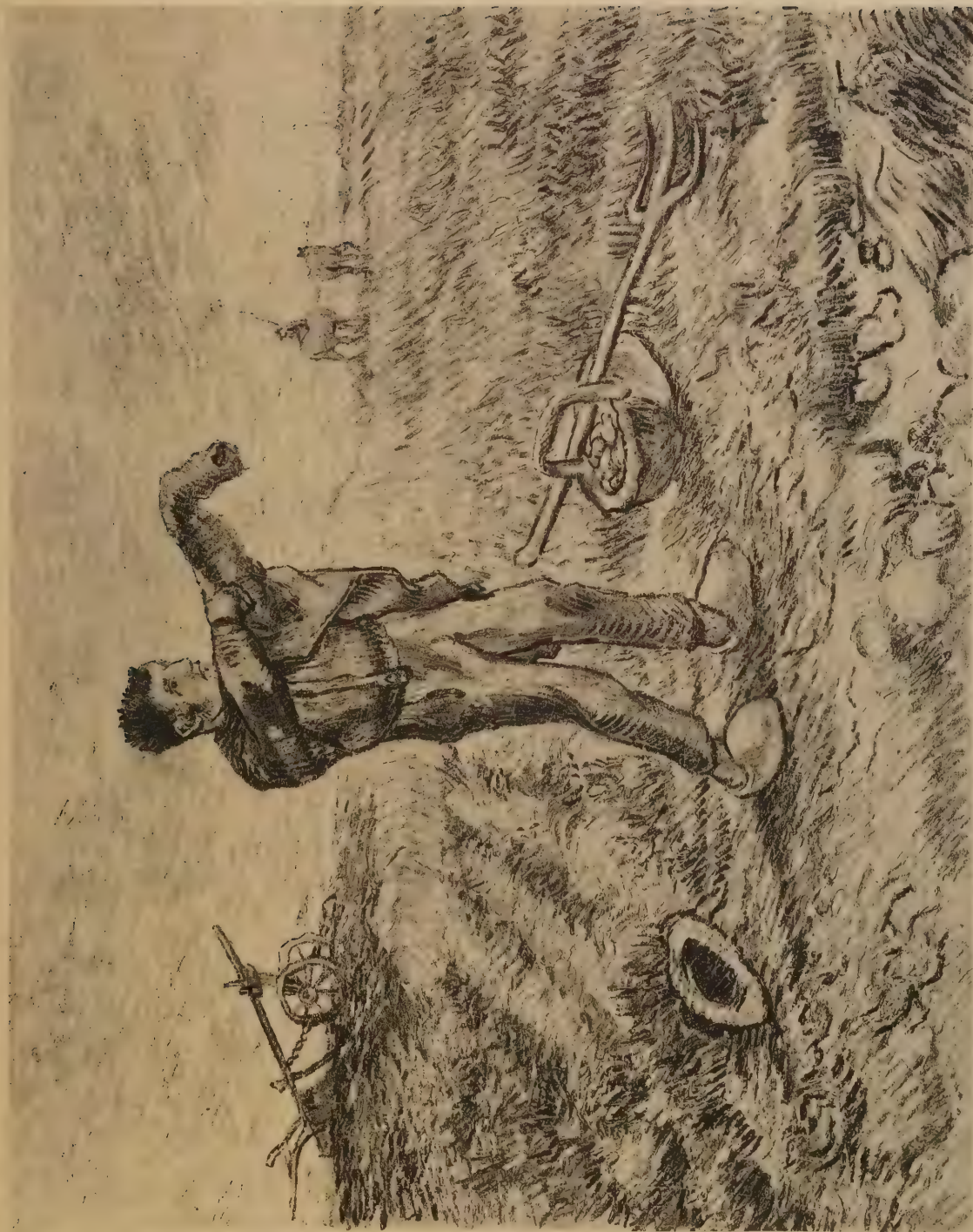
Two days later Vincent went to Auvers. In Auvers all the arrangements were admirable; his rooms were a little dearer than in the South and not so large, but quite sufficient to begin with, and no one could be more delightful than Dr. Gachet. A unique medico, who knew more about art than all the doctors in Provence put together, and painted in

## *Vincent van Gogh*

his leisure hours. He had even known Bruyas, and thought of him with an almost greater reverence than Vincent. The little doctor regarded the deeds of Montpellier as more important than the battles of Napoleon. Gachet was a friend of Pissarro and Cézanne, both of whom had stayed there; Daubigny and Daumier had also stayed there, and the present generation was represented too, several young painters worked there. In fact there was almost a School of Auvers. In a certain sense Gachet belonged to it, as he had known all the modern masters and had pictures of theirs, and knew queer stories about them such as only an apothecary could tell. The doctor had a yellow face with many folds, and life had brought him all kinds of troubles against which he struggled with his unconventionality. Art was a charm against all evils for him, and the soul of a Tartarin lived in this apothecary, whose diagnoses were probably controlled by the same spirit. He declared that Vincent suffered from no organic disease. His troubles were nothing but the foibles of an artist, for which no medicine existed. Every one was more or less crazy, and the more vital a painter's art, the greater was his madness. Cézanne could easily have been certified; if any one looked at him unawares, he ran away. Daumier was so mad that he ought to have been taken round by a circus on show. Genius and lunacy were well known to be next-door neighbours.

The theories of the doctor were all very well in their way, and were a compliment to his wit and also possibly to his perception as a doctor, although they differed not a little from the ideas of the specialists in the South. But he was quite wrong about genius, genius was the exact opposite of lunacy. Even an ordinary artisan needed a cool brain. And it was advisable not to throw about big words like genius, although there was no denying that the doctor was right as regards his health,





THE MAN WITH THE JACKET

1889/90



## *The Last Attempt*

which appeared to be most satisfactory. He seemed to have left his disease behind him in the South. A Northerner belonged to the North, and anyhow a cloister was no place for him.

There were peasants' cottages covered with thatch and comfortable-looking village streets, open corn-fields with undulating hills in the background, and the Oise running through the plain. The doctor had a few good pictures by Cézanne and Pissarro. He had never seen such a doctor's house. It was filled from top to bottom with all kinds of absurd rubbish. Mediæval furniture, Gothic ash trays and candlesticks made of pewter, stuffed animals, and in one corner lay his pictures, unframed and strewn about like waste paper. Gachet also owned a few Guilleaumin, and he referred to his pictures as 'Documents Humains.' The doctor had a clucking laugh, and promised that he would have them framed one day. Vincent painted him, in very light tones and with his queer white cap on his head, in a blue jacket on a blue background. On the table he painted a yellow book and a scarlet flower. Gachet fell in love with his portrait and immediately ordered another version of it. Gachet made an etching after this picture, for he was quite an experienced hand with the etcher's needle. Everything conceivable could be found in this absurd house, even a printing press.

The doctor understood Vincent's pictures, which was not really surprising. He said that he understood them by virtue of the experience he derived from natural history. Any one who failed to understand them must be insensible to warmth, light and movement. Vincent's work was a synonym for nature. This Dutchman forced men to weigh fundamental values, he was the Rousseau of painting. And as a result, this Rousseau's life was in accordance with his confession.

The doctor had a passion for historical observations. Van Gogh, who

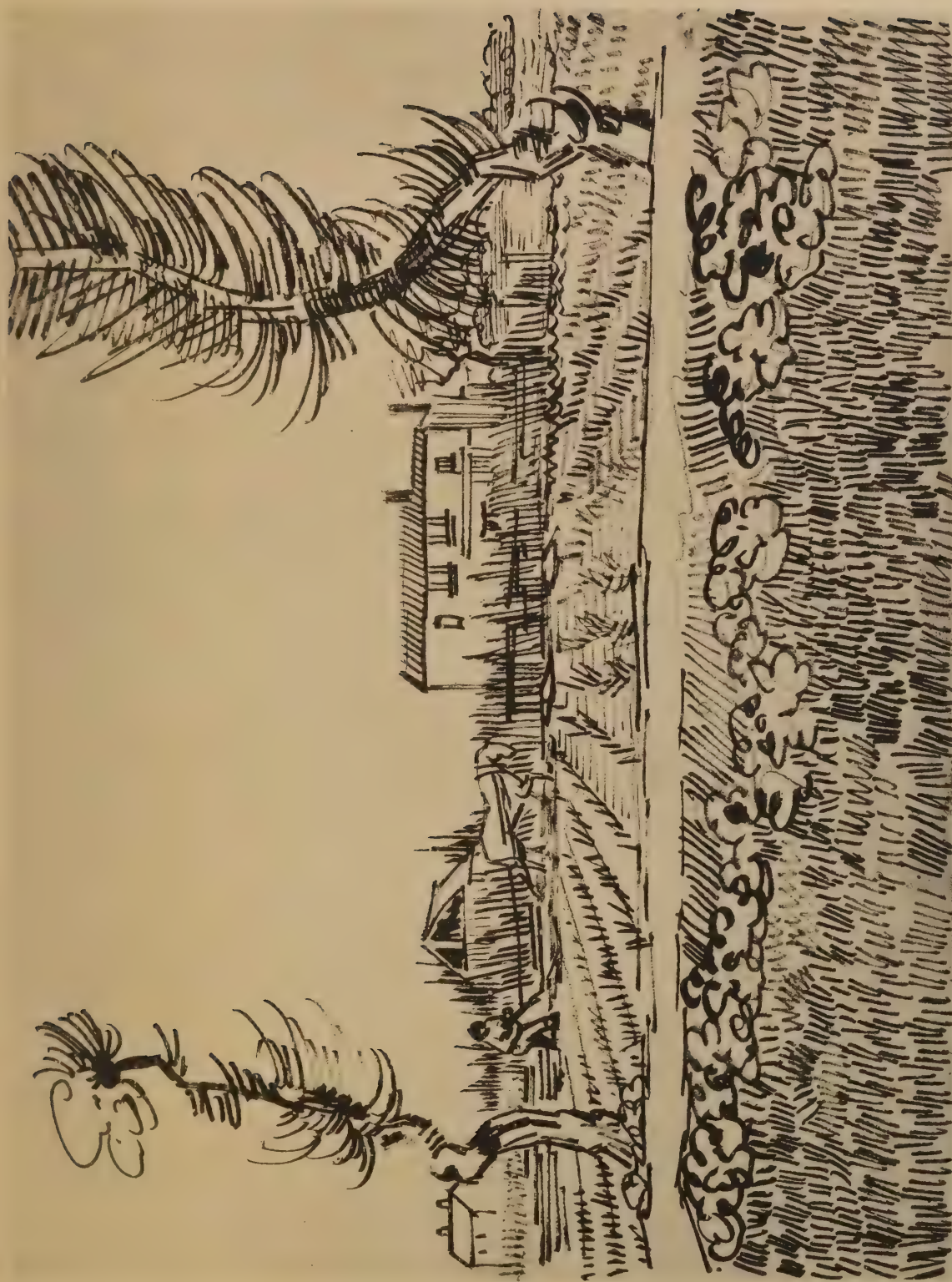


## *Vincent van Gogh*

had led art from the narrow domain of plutocratic luxury into the broad avenue of popular creation, was a continuation of the Ancients. No banality, no assumed simplicity! His work was popular art without a Plebs, the art of an individual who longed for a community. Everything the doctor said was contradictory, just as contradictory as the aim of a Dutchman who tried to find cohesion in the disintegration of Impressionism. His whole conversation was a string of paradoxes, and the doctor loved nothing better than a paradox. He maintained that what was theoretically impossible and sounded absurd in words, was suddenly confirmed by pictures, and then in the twinkling of an eye, common-sense and logic emerged from the chaos. Gachet declared that Vincent was a Dutch Rousseau who produced a peasant art made of wooden clogs, and that his work was yet as refined as the art of Japan. Innocent of all archaism and of every trace of Burne-Jones, at the same time his work was ultra-modern and yet so much a matter of course that he could not understand how it was possible to see faces and landscapes differently, and he asked himself how any one could paint differently and why every one did not paint in Vincent's style. Of course he was mad, because it would never do to call him sane as opposed to all the other worthy inhabitants of the globe.

He talked like that by the hour. The hymns of praise of Monsieur Aurier were dismissed as being merely bare statements of fact. Any form of exaggeration always made Vincent feel uncomfortable and he could not enter into the doctor's humour, but the doctor assured him that a true perception of his art would only have spoilt him as an artist. True visionaries were always blind.—Sometimes this art-loving medico resembled to the life one of the madmen in the cloister, at their worst.

It was one of the doctor's customs to invite Vincent to dine with him



LANDSCAPE WITH TWO TREES  
QUILL DRAWING 1889/90





## *The Last Attempt*

several times a week, and on these occasions he would honour him with several courses, which were served with great solemnity. There were always two kinds of wine-glasses, a little one for Bordeaux and a larger glass for Burgundy, which was served after the roast, and was bottled in such and such a château. The doctor, however, hardly wetted his lips, and did it all as a ceremony in honour of his guest. What Vincent disliked most of all was the extravagance of the doctor's dinners. He told him that instead of his excellent *hors d'œuvres*, he ought to have a few frames made for the gorgeous pictures of Pissarro, which were strewn about in the corner.

On the other hand, Vincent's work was greatly to his taste. The inhabitants of Auvers were accustomed to painters and let him put up his easel wherever he wanted to without staring at him. The huge thatched roofs on low walls, boxed together between narrow gardens, supplied him with altogether new *motifs*. The details of the picture were huddled more closely together than in the South, and though they lacked colour they made up for it in richness of tone. He had to weave his structure more closely, in order to deal with the new landscape, and he painted as a result on smaller canvases. In Auvers there was not such a powerful contrast between the blues and the yellows and the flaming sky, but instead he found rich semitones and homely colours which did not shine so radiantly from a distance, but possessed great profundity. He was reminded of the dreamy silence of Dutch villages, and attempted consciously to convey it. Jongkind had substituted for the delicate touch of the old Dutchmen his straight strokes, but he had lost the depth of the Old Masters. Vincent set himself the task of heightening his colour, widening his activity, carrying simplification even further, and yet maintaining the profundity of his creation. His curly strokes penetrated

## *Vincent van Gogh*

into the very heart of the substance he portrayed. He suggested the recession of his planes by innumerable curves, from the tiniest curls to bold arabesques, and when his curved structures developed into straight lines they gained ten times in strength. Vincent's method resulted in an infinitely richer system of design than that of Jongkind and his successors. His structure resembled more the work of Aart van der Neer and Van Goyen, only the modest vegetation of the older masters had developed into a primeval forest. He felt grateful to the North, for there he had not to contend against the Mistral and all the devilry which the Mistral brought. No doubt a Northerner ought to stay in the North.

The weird little doctor went into ecstasies of delight over every new picture. It was impossible to discuss any one of them in a workmanlike manner with him. He could see no faults, not even thin or empty patches. If Vincent showed him one the doctor was quite beside himself, and would read him a long lecture. He told him he was an ungrateful wretch, unworthy of his heaven-sent madness. People who were not a tenth part as crazy got into the Academy. Vincent pointed to the Pissarros and the Cézannes in the corner, which he was to hang up in frames at last. Had he ever achieved their calm and their quiet dignity? Gachet did not give a tinker's curse for their calm dignity, half-hearted compromises! How could one compare such a street theme to a Pissarro, or to a hundred Pissarros. Vincent lost his temper and made for the door, saying that he had to go to his work. He almost threw the doctor out of his own house. He told him that he found it hard to listen to him, and he regarded what he said as insulting to him personally. And it really was degrading to leave the Pissarros and Cézannes unframed.—The doctor clucked, he did not frame Van Gogh's pictures either, they lay about quite naked, without even their

## *The Last Attempt*

stretchers.—He would not hear a word against Vincent's pictures, and the little street themes were such treasures that he refused to part with them, even for the time it would take to have them framed.

Vincent was glad that he could go occasionally to visit Theo in Paris, and that his brother and sister-in-law could manage the expedition to Auvers. In June the young couple came over on a Sunday and brought little Vincent with them. Gachet gave a special dinner-party as if it was a jubilee. Theo was not looking well, it was the old story—Messrs. Goupil on the boulevard! The ideal solution would be for Theo to start a shop of his own, even if he could not found the community Vincent longed for. Gachet was all in favour of the plan, a shop filled with nothing but Van Gogh's pictures was bound to have an immense success; it would be a shop of human documents in the middle of the boulevard. There remained the problem of the capital. Ought not the State to help him? Confound it, was it not the duty of any Government, which did not make a farce of culture, to give publicity to human documents?—Vincent did not take part in the conversation, but showed the hens in the yard to his little nephew, crowed cock-a-doodle-do and took him to see the cows being milked. If the little fellow could only live out in the country his colour would be better. And it would be a good thing for Theo and also for Jo.—Gachet conceived the plan of etching all Van Gogh's most important pictures and publishing them like Lauzet's lithographs of Monticelli. He would look after the printing of the plates. Vincent agreed, on condition that etchings after Gauguin should be included. A discussion on Gauguin followed, during which Vincent lost his temper, ran out into the yard, crowed cock-a-doodle-do, and danced about with his little nephew, who screamed with delight. Theo and Jo promised to come again before long. In the



## *Vincent van Gogh*

meantime Vincent was to visit them in Paris. They decided that they could permit themselves the luxury of meeting at least once a fortnight.

He painted a picture of Madame Daubigny's garden, which was not as full-blooded as his street scenes. It lacked their dramatic quality and their vitality, and suggested contemplation rather than action, but it was richer in colour. Gachet called it 'le jardin de France.'

When Vincent's pictures arrived from Arles and Saint Remy, he locked the door and hid them in a different room of his lodgings and told the doctor nothing. But the weird little medico found out after all and then he was quite beside himself. He had not been prepared for such work. These pictures were not human documents but the songs of heroes. He meant it literally. The brushwork of these canvases ceased to be brushwork and became rich melodies, heroic symphonies. The doctor could almost hear the tunes, and declared that the colours of the garden of the asylum could be reproduced in sound values. He tried to demonstrate it with his tinkling voice and fluted and hummed all day long, while Vincent escaped into the fields. When he returned at night the doctor was still at it, twirling in the air pieces of paper with music written on them, while he rummaged among the pictures, clucking and giggling. He was prepared to give up his practice in order to investigate his newly discovered theories, and he insisted that he would feel honoured and delighted if the master would participate in their experiments—his son and daughter, who were adepts, would assist them. Next day the trio really sat down at the piano to rehearse the *Arlésienne*.

Theo's letter brought bad news. The boy was ill, and Vincent wanted to take the next train to see him. Jo was not well either, and Theo was worried to death. But perhaps it would be better after all if he did not







CYPRESSES

1889/90



## *The Last Attempt*

go there. How could such a clumsy creature help them? He would only be in their way and frighten the baby. He wrote a short note and then rushed at his work. If anything happened to little Vincent, life would be bleak indeed. He threw down his brushes and ran to the doctor. Gachet only laughed and said that the baby was teething. Vincent was furious, the health of the child touched him too nearly, and he told the doctor that presumably he was as vague about a baby's illness as he was about painting.

Two days afterwards, however, he received a confirmation from Theo that the trouble was caused by little Vincent's first tooth. And so Vincent had after all mistaken a sign of life for a sign of decay, and he felt a load far greater than its cause lifted off his shoulders. Vincent made his peace with the doctor and painted Mademoiselle Gachet at the piano and then another girl in Auvers, the girl with the capotte. These portraits were not a success, perhaps because he was not used to ladies and could not concentrate his thoughts. Moreover he was not accustomed to the tall shape of the canvas he used for the picture at the piano. His rhythm became halting, his hand hesitated and lost its vigour. Perhaps the doctor distracted him, for he was glued to the easel and clucked continuously. One thing was quite certain, that if by chance he had another fit he could count on any one rather than the doctor. It was doubtful which of the two of them was more mad. He left the portraits, although he thought them bad, and started a landscape. The heat in Auvers was oppressive. Gauguin wrote him curiously gentle letters. He was always gentle when he was in trouble. His latest idea about Madagascar was as wild as suicide. But if he insisted Vincent would join him. Perhaps Madagascar was not so bad after all, although a friend of Milliet's had served there and disliked it. But who

## *Vincent van Gogh*

knows what Milliet's friends had done there? Yes, on further thought, Madagascar was an excellent plan, and he determined to proceed at once to Pont Aven to discuss the matter with Gauguin. In Pont Aven he could also paint seascapes. He suddenly felt an uncontrollable longing for the sea and for ships. But the journey to Pont Aven was terribly complicated, much more complicated than the journey to Madagascar. Sometimes the slightest details seemed to be embedded in inextricable entanglements. Sometimes he could not do the simplest thing, such as walk over to the doctor's house.

He felt that he must not be afraid or else his fear would be realized. Or perhaps it was good to be afraid? His experience rather suggested it. His illness attacked him just when he least suspected it, in the midst of his work. He had never felt it coming. And especially if he was working well it came, quick as lightning. The logical conclusion was to avoid good work, and the last time he had suffered from his fits in Arles, it was no doubt due to the fact that he was working well. But then that was all far away, Arles was many hundred miles distant. No, his illness had stayed behind in the South, and how could he be ill here in his lodgings where there was no cloister and no warder and no padded cells? He was allowed to be at liberty, therefore he must be well. But was it really safe to let such a creature run about quite freely?

Sometimes he felt the imminence of danger. He felt the fits would return, and he was tempted to hurl himself with all his might against his door, beyond which he could fancy that he saw the phantom of his ailment. He talked little and avoided the doctor, with the result that his fear oppressed him more than ever. No! it was better to paint, and if it came, it came. He plunged himself into his work, and he was working well, the colours obeyed his every wish. At five o'clock in the







HARVESTING  
WATER-COLOUR 1889/90

## *The Last Attempt*

morning he could be found at his easel; no doubt it was a mistake to paint like that, but it was the only way of making life supportable.

One day at the beginning of July he fled to Paris. His brother and Jo had other cares, and it was Vincent who cheered them up and who was gay and hearty. The health of the little one was still uncertain, but then every child had to go through its periods of teething. Theo kept on asking Vincent whether he was well. Why did he always ask? Did he not look well? He cheered them up and crowed cock-a-doodle-do to the little one. The only way to live was to live in the country, in Auvers he lived like a lord.

While he talked to them he thought of other things and sat there like a smiling criminal expecting the police at any moment; he talked for the sake of talking. Theo began to regain his old vitality, and thought that perhaps he might after all found the community. He had met an American, a queer mad fellow, who was very rich and who might do it for amusement. He was a kind of Vanderbilt—he wore a green waistcoat—and was prepared to subscribe a very substantial portion of the capital, but of course there were other difficulties to be overcome. There always were other difficulties. Theo anticipated a final rupture with Messrs. Goupil. It had to come one day, and that would be an evil day for him.

Jo suggested that now that, thank heaven, Vincent was well, he ought to get married. There were plenty of nice girls in Holland who would make him happy—she had a friend there.

Vincent did not say 'no' to her suggestion, only that he would have to think it over thoroughly. In the best of all worlds everything was always for the best.

He ran across old acquaintances—Lautrec and Anquetin. They



## *Vincent van Gogh*

talked to him differently now, without their stupid grinning, and they treated him, partially in jest and partially seriously, like a man who had returned from a difficult expedition to a foreign part of the world. The result of this imaginary journey to the South Pole was that Vincent felt more at home with his Paris friends and would even like to have stayed with them instead of at Auvers. They all knew Aurier's article and considered it very amusing. They told him that Bernard got hysterics when he read it and that Gauguin had written a reply to the *Mercure*, saying that he had arrived at the South Pole twenty-four hours before Van Gogh.—Finally Isaacsohn arrived and stayed for the evening and made unintelligible remarks about his pictures. It was too much for Vincent, and he returned to Auvers.

He told Jo that he quite agreed with her that it was better to create children than pictures, if one could not make human beings out of words. Painted words at any rate were not enough. Modern pictures made people mad because pictures were forces without an aim. Poets perhaps might reach the goal with their strange phrases. Christ was greater than all other artists because he reached the goal without any phrases. His words marched on through life, strewing humanity about them like grain in a newly ploughed field. As long as artists felt the strength and purity of his words, art had flourished.

He fetched down his Bible for the first time after a long period, but the familiar verses did not move him now as they used to do. While he read the Bible the phantom of his parents' house haunted and distracted him.

So he turned again to his pictures. He painted till the brush dropped from his fingers. Young painters talked to him in vain and could elicit no replies. He saved every breath that was in him for his work. He







THE MAN WITH THE SICKLE (AFTER MILLET)

1889/90

## *The Last Attempt*

avoided his violent baroque style and his pictures became gentler than the older ones. When the Mairie in Auvers was decorated with flags for the celebration of the 14th of July, he painted it with its blue, white and red streamers and rows of coloured lanterns dangling from long strings. There is something of Monet and Pissarro in the picture. The planes were divided by small, even, parallel strokes; even Signac would have enjoyed it. None of his earlier pictures were so symmetrical. The systematic structure of the canvas weakens his usual naturalism. The trees round the little square partake more of the nature of decoration than of his usual tree-like organisms. But the profundity and solidity of his drawing lost nothing by his new method of construction. The little house is rooted to the ground like a rock and stands there as firmly as the peasant chair in the yellow house in Arles, and as solidly as his sunflowers. It expresses the unsullied joy of a manly heart at the gay festivities of the people.

When Doctor Gachet saw the picture he maintained that the 14th of July had been made a holiday only by virtue of this picture and that you ought to sing the Marseillaise while you looked at it. The State ought to hang it in the Louvre, or better still in the Panthéon. He declared Vincent's intention of giving it to Père Pissarro profanation.

Vincent did not reply, but came back to the doctor afterwards and asked him for an interview. He began to tell a complicated story about the duties that we owed to artists, especially to such veterans as Père Pissarro. There was something strange in his voice. Anyhow the doctor must have Pissarro's pictures framed at last and also those of Cézanne. The pleading notes of a child were in Vincent's voice. The doctor had something to say about the moods of artists, but he promised nevertheless to send for the carpenter. Next day Vincent returned and walked



## *Vincent van Gogh*

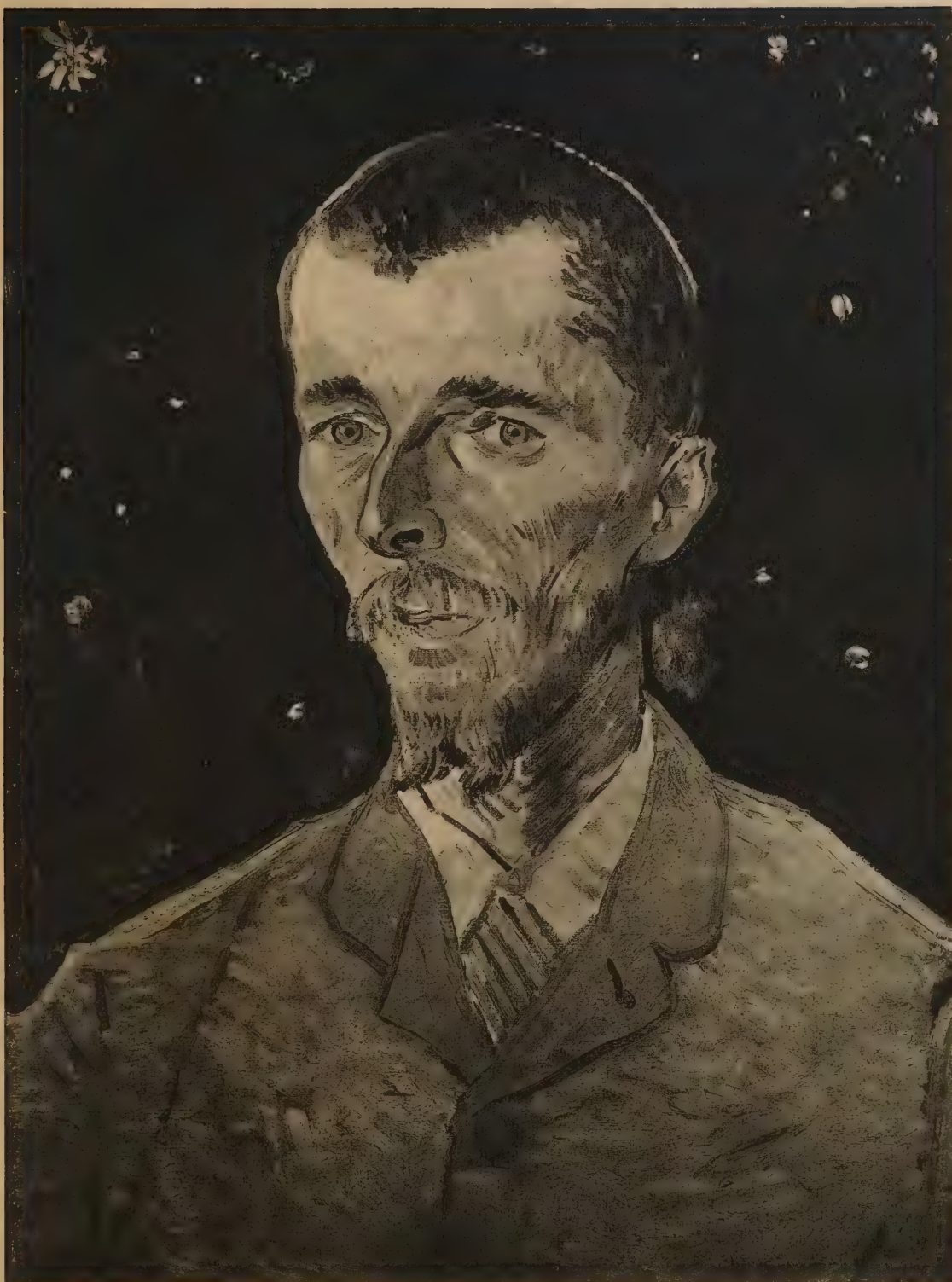
straight into the doctor's room, where, just as he had expected, the pictures were still lying about anyhow in the corner.

That was too much! It was very wrong of him! Only blackguards behaved like that! Père Pissarro, who was the father of us all!

Vincent's eyes were bloodshot. The little doctor clucked no more. He happened to look into a mirror over Vincent's shoulder and saw that there was a revolver behind his back. The many folds on the doctor's face became tense.—'Mon ami,' he stammered.

Vincent gazed at him, laughed awkwardly, and then marched out. As soon as he reached his room he fired a bullet into the pit of his stomach. It was the second Sunday after the festivities. He was unconscious when they found him. When he regained consciousness he asked for his pipe. Gachet wrote to Theo, and as he did not know his address and as Vincent refused to give it to him because he did not want to have any fuss made, the letter was sent to the Goupil Gallery. Theo did not get the letter until the following morning. When he arrived Vincent was already lying quietly on his bed, without any pain. Gachet was hopeful. He did not believe it was possible to destroy such a vitality against its will. And although the action which had laid him low was the work of his own hand, Gachet could only regard it as an impulse which had temporarily asserted itself against Vincent's own will. If a man of his vitality wanted to live, he would live. As long as he could work he would not pass away. The incomparable creations of his vital nature hardly permitted any doubt as to his desire to live and therefore the world might expect his recovery.

Theo Van Gogh became impatient and wanted to know details of the nature of his wound. It was serious; several vessels had been perforated, but Vincent's determination had outlived even more serious



PORTRAIT

1889/90







ROAD-MAKING IN ARLES

1890



## *The Last Attempt*

obstacles. No operation was necessary or possible. Everything depended upon his determination. Vincent nodded. He entirely agreed with the doctor's diagnosis.

The little doctor clucked and assured him that he could always rely on his diagnoses.

No sooner had Theo been left alone with his brother than Vincent began: 'Qu'est-ce que tu veux, mon frère? It has really been too much for me. Of course there are more unfortunate wretches, for instance that poor creature—you know—Sien, who I suppose has gone back to her brothel by now. And much of what I could not bear has been, I know, my own fault. Did you ever know such an awkward and helpless fellow as me? I can't even manage to use a revolver properly. I have never been able to do anything the right way. Any one else in my shoes could have solved my little problems and have managed quite well. One thing is certain, that is that I did not do well at all. No, really it was more than I could manage.

'I have always strayed about all over the place, never quiet for a moment. Even when I was in London wearing a morning coat and a top-hat I could never find peace. When I was in Brabant I longed for London and my top-hat, and when I was in the city where everybody is as they ought to be, I longed for the open fields of Brabant. There is something in me which simply makes it impossible for me to accept my lot as it is; I am cursed with a preposterous discontent. But if, for instance, Ursula or whatever her name was, had accepted me, who knows what might have happened? The whole thing was of course dreadfully banal. There were a thousand other Ursulas. But does it not strike you as curious that a fellow can run all over Europe seeking and seeking, really trying hard, and never find a soul? The things that



## *Vincent van Gogh*

made the difference were perhaps only trivial little peculiarities, such as my always wanting to get an answer. It was just the same with father and mother. But can you converse with anybody without getting a reply? It really looks as if one must believe that the rest of the world talks without ever getting an answer. Do you believe that? Do you talk like that, for instance with Jo? I could have been content with just a few sentences, but no, I never heard them. The result was I only talked to myself, which made me nasty and spiteful. And that is the way, a very roundabout way, by which you approach your God. You only talk with yourself when you commune with God, with the result that you end up by seeming almost to be God yourself or at any rate, some one of tremendous importance. The whole process is one which makes you quite different from your fellows and aggressive into the bargain. If I could only have found somebody in London who had any use for ears, I would have cut both of them off. But it is of course disgustingly aggressive to send any one such things.

'Theo, qu'est-ce que tu veux? I was ready to love any one and every one. Isn't it odd that no one, of the many whom I have met, liked me? You may think that it is rather pretentious to say so, but honestly there was not one. Not even you, Theo, although you have done everything for me. Why did you do it? You will say that that is another of those questions to which only I expect an answer, and that decent people are satisfied by deeds. But you see, that is just my disease, that I lack this decency which every one else possesses. I know very well that you wanted to love me and that to-morrow you will love me terribly, so much so that it may kill you. But as long as I was there you only put up with me. You were always glad when I turned my back. There was something that made you prickle all over when I arrived. Come, admit



ROSES

1890





## *The Last Attempt*

it! I couldn't understand it either, because I could not even manage to suppress the external and superficial things which made you prickle and tingle.

'Theo, qu'est-ce que tu veux? All my life it has been the same story. I always felt as I did in London about the fields in Brabant, and then when I was with you we quarrelled. And then I wonder whether whatever it was that made you prickle is something very trivial or if it is something very, very important which ought not to be suppressed but rather brought to the surface? No! it is just viciousness and beastliness. The other day I longed terribly for you and Jo, so much so that I thought I could not wait another minute, and then when I came I forgot everything I wanted to say to you because of your stupid sideboard in the dining-room, and I just wanted to get away again as quickly as I could. Of course it was not only the sideboard, although I don't like it, I don't like any of your furniture, although it is admirable and could not be better. Christ was so infinitely great because no furniture or any other stupid accessories ever stood in his way. Although perhaps the disciples only thought afterwards that nothing ever stood in His way, because then only His greatness remained. Perhaps there were times when they were furious with Him during his lifetime, Judas for instance, and they may have been justified. He, on the other hand, did not get cross with them, although He probably had reasons in plenty.—Do you think that I don't know what Gauguin was like to me? From the very first day he was aggravating and he said things which he knew went against the grain; he had a special talent for saying such things. But who can say that he did not come with the honest intention of loving me and that he did not try as hard as he could to do so? What is it that drives him to his savages? Surely nothing but the irritating

## *Vincent van Gogh*

poison which is in him and which gives him no peace. And at the same time he lives on his poison. He has too much of it in his being, and my illness comes from nothing but the lack of this substance. My evil temper, too, is caused only by the lack of such a poison in my constitution. But once in Montpellier in the Bruyas room Gauguin very nearly held me in his arms, because he was thinking of Delacroix. Delacroix was a kind of antidote to his poison. Yes, I think we did embrace each other then, without knowing it. And immediately afterwards he made me mad. You, too, Theo, held me in your arms once, in our old lodgings in Montmartre, because you were unconscious of me. And before that time we embraced each other once in Holland; that was by the old mill. We were thinking about the future then. Life with simple people is always less irritating, and it is always easier to approach them. The miners in La Borinage were good fellows and the Roulins and also the warder with the face of a beast of prey. The only trouble is that these people bore you. While you are in the thick of your work intercourse with them is sufficient because they too are always hard at their own. In the intervals you just pass the time of day with them and there it ends. There are many things which they understand better than we do, even subjects which really only concern us, but they have a low opinion of them because they are too busy with their own concerns. Their simplicity is really nothing but self-protection. But then the object of living together does not happen to be to protect oneself.'

Gachet had forbidden Vincent to talk too much, but talking did not fatigue him in the least. Did Theo not notice that they were just going to have one of the good moments of their lives when they would embrace each other again, and this time perhaps they would think of one another?







PORTRAIT

1890



AUVERS SUR OISE

1890





## *The Last Attempt*

He inquired about Jo and little Vincent. They had gone to Holland a few days earlier, where Theo had intended to spend his holidays. And instead Theo sat there and waited for the good moment. It really was too bad! But as he was there, he might write a line to Gauguin and also to little Bernard. Gauguin had liked one of the pictures of the *Arlésienne*, and he was to have her, and after all Bernard got the *Sunflowers*, which had been refused him the other day in a stupid mood.

In order to rest Vincent, Theo went out of doors for an hour. It was dark and the wind whistled through the trees. Once he fell down, and was so tired that he stayed for a while on his knees; a deep bitterness rose up in his heart. Against himself? Against Vincent? Even at this hour? Yonder stood a mill.—Why, of course, the mill of Rijswijk. He raised himself up and stood there alone in the field, his clothes fluttering about him like a scarecrow. Then he rushed home and embraced his brother with unusual intensity. Their arms were clasped for a long time, and they thought of the past.

Vincent asked for the room to be lighted. The last pictures of the fields near Auvers were too thin, but the village streets seemed pretty solid. They were like little tough fellows who could stand up quite well to the powerful creatures of Arles. They were all here, the garden of the asylum, the *Berceuse* and the *Sunflowers*, the cycle of the poet's garden, the portrait of himself with the bandage, the landscapes of the plain of Arles, and the *Arlésienne*. Theo picked them up one by one, put them against the wall, stepped back, seemed puzzled, examined each picture again closely, took the lamp down and knelt on the floor so that he could see the pictures at the right level. Something unusual was happening, although Theo knew the pictures intimately. While he was in Arles he had seen the pictures in the yellow house only for a few

## *Vincent van Gogh*

minutes, but the other day, during his last visit, he had looked at them for hours. He must either have been asleep then, or else his present state of mind was abnormal. Not one, but all the pictures from Arles had changed. As a rule every picture of Vincent's which he did not happen to have on his walls gave him a kind of shock at first, like a badly driven train which is suddenly brought to a standstill and throws the passengers out of their seats. All the pictures possessed this quality to a greater or lesser degree. It was the symbol of the fact that Vincent was a Dutch outsider in France, it was a relic from the Ardappeleeters. People like Aurier regarded this quality as constituting Vincent's originality and they made a virtue and a novelty out of it, but Theo suffered from no illusions. He knew that this shock which the pictures gave him was the element which prevented Vincent from overcoming his final problems. It was a peculiarity which he had never got under control, and it was perhaps one of the causes of his illness. But to-day the shock was missing. The colours caught his eyes as soon as they rested on them, and they were carried on, forcibly it is true, but without any superfluous brutality. The pictures moved him deeply at once and carried him into the very heart of their being, into the heart of their creator, and the power of these pictures had not grown less but seemed like a building from which the clumsy encumbrances of scaffolding had been removed. Theo suddenly perceived much more than he had ever done in Vincent's pictures. All that Vincent had aimed at was there, complete.—Theo, cautious as ever, mistrusted his eyes and tried to feel the shock he used to experience. He went from one picture to the other and then turned to his brother with all the glory of the pictures shining in his eyes.

Vincent laughed; it was only because he had washed them. The







THE AWAKENING OF LAZARUS (AFTER REMBRANDT)

1890

## *The Last Attempt*

pictures which had come from the South had dried in the meantime and he had washed them a little with water, removed the oiliness and then varnished them. If Theo would do the same to the pictures in his flat they would look just as these did. The canvases he had only just completed in Auvers would have to wait a little. The thicker the colour the more time was needed. In the course of years the tones of his colours would grow more and more together. Possibly much of what gave him a shock now would improve later on.

They looked at the pictures and smoked. Now and again Vincent would point with his pipe to one which seemed to protrude from the rest. Theo moved it to another place where it seemed to fall in with the rest; he arranged them in a way in which they might be hung at an exhibition. Perhaps he could persuade his people on the boulevard to arrange one at some time. Vincent, however, did not consider the backgrounds in the *entresol* suitable. They were much too elegant, and his pictures looked their best against the whitewashed walls in the yellow house. Theo did not agree, he had once put an old piece of brocade behind the picture with the basket and the yellow apples painted in Arles, and the effect was magnificent. They could stand quite different framing. Vincent was not to suppose that simply conceived pictures were only meant for the wretched houses of the poor. In such surroundings his simplicity would merely seem like part of the general misery. Heavily gilt and carved frames hung against silk walls, with precious carpets lying on the floor, were just good enough for the simplicity of great masters. What was art after all, if it was not capable of transcending the limits of its origin?

Vincent listened; no one had ever told him that before. Theo continued: 'Yes, Vincent, you have had more than your share of misery,

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and your misery has become the happiness of your pictures. There have been few good moments in which you were allowed to approach your fellows; there were no arms to wrap you round, and even I perhaps was not allowed to love you. But your pictures are warm embraces. Many people tread the middle path between suffering and joy, and they stroll through the world grinning inanely or more often sighing, and finally they stumble round a dark corner, which makes them even smaller than they were before, and they leave behind them nothing but a heap of sighs and a little futile laughter. But you have traced eternal furrows and your agony will quench the thirst of coming generations. The greater your suffering has been, the mightier have been the joyous footsteps of your journey. Ploughing furrows has been your destiny, and you strode across the fields like a sower. Think of the days you have been sowing, there are few in which you have been idle. The expression of your face no doubt has grown distorted; was it anguish or the mark of honest labour? The bread you have eaten has been hard, your fellows have been hard to you, and hard has been the treatment God has meted out to you every day of your life. But the work, the structure that you leave behind you, is as firm as the hardness you experienced. When your heart shall cease to beat within your bosom, it will throb in your pictures.'

He got up and turned to the collection of canvases. Vincent looked at his brother in amazement. How well he had said it all! Theo was more intelligent than all the modern critics and poets, and in general there was something in the metamorphosis which he had sketched. If, however, such interpretations were possible, no doubt the reverse could be deduced with equal logic. It would be good to know the truth before it was too late. Vincent had believed that he was just painting, say a tree







THE GOOD SAMARITAN (AFTER DELACROIX)

1890







IN AUVERS

1890

## *The Last Attempt*

or a woman, without offending any one, and instead of a tree or a woman he painted something jagged, which hurt people and stung them, something over which they stumbled, something irritating. So the question arose as to whether most of his work had not possessed this quality, and whether it would not have been wiser not to offend against the present, instead of helping the dim and distant future. No doubt the future was very great and there were many good things that could be said about it, but no one had been there yet.

Theo nodded. He stood there as he had done a little while since in the field, and Vincent noticed how thin his brother had grown of late years.

‘Of course it is irritating,’ murmured Theo. ‘For all the others did something useful, even my people on the boulevard. They sat there behind their shell and stuck to it like frogs to their pond; they would say neither yes nor no, they would not see, they would not think. The shell in which they lived had to see and to speak and to act for them. All the world helped to make this cursed shell. Only men like Vincent did nothing for it, but worked against it. He always started everything from the beginning, and stood on the far side of the pond calling to the others. Of course it was irritating! How could it be otherwise, when he stood, looking down on their pond, with the solid earth beneath his feet? He said white when the others said black, he laughed while they cried. Perhaps he did it only for fun, and because he was one and the others were the whole world. He was an oddity, like the men who used to be kept at court in the olden days. And then of course it took time for him to penetrate the general shell. Would he ever penetrate it completely? Would he ever draw all men unto him, even though he gave his life to do it? Or would he come up against a new and more

## *Vincent van Gogh*

impenetrable shell and finally, worst of all, the approbation of the masses? If the world took him seriously, he would be regarded as its destroyer. He alone. No wonder he aggravated them, when he was a thorn in the side of mankind. Cast him out, kill him! Bury the traitor out of sight, under the shell!—No, don't beat him, he is not worth it. Laugh! Let a madman like that go on with his painting!'

Theo was trembling. What was he trembling like that for? He looked like a scarecrow.

Suddenly Theo threw himself down, or else a mightier power cast him upon the floor. His lips moved and they said: 'Never again, brother! So help me God!' He lay on the floor with his head thrown back on the bed and his mouth wide open.

Vincent could not understand, for a cloud had descended upon his senses. There was only one thing he believed he realized, and that was that their paths were no longer divided. They were travelling along the same road in the same direction, and this was the good moment.

Then Vincent whispered to Theo that now he wanted to go home. He said it in Dutch: 'Z66 heen kan gaan.'—Theo bent over him and closed his eyes.

It was in the early hours of the morning of the 29th of July 1890. Theo waited until day-break and then he went to fetch the doctor.

But the coloured canvases would not wait until the dawn. Blue stepped forward and bowed down and sang a melody with the tones from which he had created the damp depths of his ploughed fields, and the stone of his rocks, the height of his skies, and the glitter of his water. Then came Green, carrying the sap of his cypress trees, the silver of his olives, and the silent wealth of his bushes and grass. Then Orange leapt forward in her garment of fire, raising a shout as she passed through







PORTRAIT OF A GIRL

1890





PORTRAIT OF DR. GACHET

1890





## *The Last Attempt*

the room. Orange was not alone, Carmine and Geranium Red danced with her. They moved like waves of luminous smoke from licking flames, and sometimes they seemed like large winged butterflies with great patterns on their backs. The floor was covered with the red of the tiles in Arles, and in between shone sapphire and emerald. When they had all come to pay their tribute a fanfare sounded, and Yellow, his black-eyed mistress, entered in her Chinese robe of state. Ten women came with her, the fairest of the Empire, garbed in gentler tones of the same yellow, and stood at her side bearing sunflowers. His beloved made a deep obeisance before the catafalque and the ten women did likewise. And as they bowed, all the sheaves of wheat in the field, all the flowers and the fruit bowed down likewise, and the sun shed his rays on the cottage in Auvers.

Three days afterwards Vincent was buried in the little cemetery between the corn-fields. A few painters were present, and Dr. Gachet planted sunflowers round the grave. Theo took the pictures away with him and had some difficulty in getting them into his rooms in the Cité Pigalle. He was preparing for the exhibition. Gauguin did not consider it advisable to waste time upon the products of a man who was mentally deficient, and he was therefore not in favour of an exhibition, as he believed that it would only add confusion to the already muddled views concerning art entertained by the rest of the world. Theo however was not to be put off, and Bernard agreed to write an introduction, in which he determined to explain to the public his relation to Van Gogh. He also published the letters he had received from Vincent in the *Mercure*, again with an introduction.

Theo spent every evening reckoning out the expenses of founding the community. Pressure of work prevented his taking any holidays,

## *Vincent van Gogh*

although Jo had looked to them to improve his health. He determined to confine the enterprise of the community to France and Holland, with a branch in the yellow house in Arles and another one in Nuenen. Paris would have to remain its centre for the time being, because he could control it better from there. Later on however he would leave Paris, and the undertaking would be conducted solely from the country. He wrote a great number of letters. Late at night the American with the green waistcoat would arrive to discuss the project with Theo, and he always made new and unforeseeable demands, wishes which upset everything which Theo had with care persuaded him to accept the previous day. In order not to lose his millions, Theo was obliged to give way to his requirements. Less than six months after the Sunday in Auvers, Theo Van Gogh followed his brother. He lies beside him among the fields.

*The End*

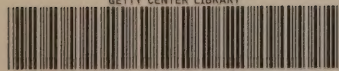








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